

University of Stirling

Doctor of Philosophy

PhD Public Relations

**The "unsung heroes" of spin? Parliamentary Assistants'
Management, Organisation and Practices of Communication
on behalf of Scottish Parliamentarians**

by Sebastian Ludwicki-Ziegler (2635069)

April, 2023

Acknowledgements

The PhD has been a long journey, with some unforeseen obstacles going beyond the usual ups and downs of the research process. COVID and my family's health were major factors requiring significant adjustments. Because of this, I need to give my special thanks to my supervisors, Professor Dr Adrian Hadland and Dr William Dinan. They didn't just support me along the way with their suggestions and constructive feedback; they also let me work at my own pace and facilitated the necessary arrangements to cope with a very challenging period. I want to say thank you to both of you!

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Abstract

Parliamentary assistants (PAs) are recognised as being of crucial importance for parliamentarians. However, even though the literature acknowledges their relevance for the work of parliamentarians, they are rarely the subject of scholarly debates or in-depth research. This is particularly surprising given that the debates around spin doctors would have invited to investigate the role of PAs in the political communication of parliamentarians. The role of those media advisors is similar to that of PAs, who have communication-related duties. The practices of PAs in creating communication content or managing media are unexplored territory. It is also unknown how dynamics within parliamentary offices affect the creation of political communication on behalf of parliamentarians. To close this gap of knowledge, this study is going to answer two research questions:

1. What importance do parliamentary offices assign to media management and political communication outside the purdah period?
2. How is the relationship between parliamentarians and the media managed and political communication planned, designed, and executed in their parliamentary offices?

This research project uses a qualitative research design and utilises a case study approach. Sixty semi-structured expert interviews were conducted, and the sampling was focused on recent and former PAs, parliamentarians, and PPG staff members. The findings show that parliamentarians' preferences and internal and external constraints limit the professionalisation and mediatisation of political communication on behalf of parliamentarians. Political communication is often undertaken as a group rather than a team effort, and the importance assigned does not usually exceed the relevance of other tasks.

The research provides insight into parliamentary assistants' dynamics, practices, and approaches to political communication and media management in an increasingly professionalised and mediatised political environment. It addresses significant gaps in knowledge and advances the debates on the mediatisation of politics and the professionalisation of political communications.

Formal Confirmation of Ethical Approval



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08 May 2019

Dear Sebastian,

Re: Ethics Application: Reinventing political communication: An investigation into parliamentary assistants as shadow players of political communication – GUEP647

Thank you for your submission of the above to the General University Ethics Panel.

The ethical approaches of this project have been approved by GUEP with the following comment. You can now proceed with your research.

- As it is a very small pool of respondents it may be useful to allow those who wish to remain anonymous to read over the transcript to check that they cannot be identified by what they say.

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Yours sincerely,
Pp

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "R Beaton".

On behalf of GUEP
Dr William Munro
Deputy Chair of GUEP

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1 Introduction

Parliamentary assistants (PAs) are an integral part of the parliamentary workforce. Compared to other parts of the parliamentary workforce (e.g., clerks), they are recruited by and accountable to individual Members of the Parliament (MPs) or Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs). PAs work on behalf of individual parliamentarians; they research and provide briefings on policies, arrange meetings, organise the diary, plan events, undertake casework, and communicate and deal with media requests on behalf of the parliamentarian (W4MP, 2020, Dale, 2015). They are usually younger than their employers and relatively inexperienced in the tasks they are assigned to, yet of vital importance for parliamentarians to fulfil their responsibilities (McKee, 2023, Dale, 2015, Flynn, 2012). In this context, it is not surprising that trust is of utmost importance in the relationship between PA and parliamentarian (McKee, 2023, Dale, 2015, Ryle, 1981, for comparison with the international context, see, e.g. Sabag Ben-Porat et al., 2020). PA's expanding role is closely connected to the growing complexities of the duties and responsibilities of legislators. This is mirrored in the significant rise of the annual staff allowance from £8000 in 1981 (equivalent to £27,171 in 2022¹) to £179,330 for MPs outside of London and £190,750 for MPs from London constituencies for the parliamentary session 2021-22 (compare Ryle, 1981, with The Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA), 2021). Despite this critical and increasingly influential role in policy-making and communication, the role and scope of PAs' activities are under-researched, not just in the UK context but also internationally, as will be shown and further discussed in Chapter 4. This thesis intends to address this evident gap in our understanding of how the UK's democracy functions on a day-to-day level, with specific reference to Scotland.

Developments in the UK are embedded in the broader developments of the professionalisation of politics, which can be observed in democracies worldwide (Cairney, 2007). These trends have been subject to significant debate on how they affect the defining qualities and functioning of democracies (see, e.g., Landgrave and Weller, 2020, Fawcett and Corbett, 2018, Cairney, 2007). Other debates, closely related to the ongoing enquiries on professionalisation, focused on the rise of spin doctors, the

¹ The inflation adjusted allowance rate has been calculated with the inflation calculator of the Bank of England (<https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator>).

integration of marketing techniques and PR instruments in political communication and campaigns (see, e.g., Rafter, 2017, Negrine et al., 2007, Scammell, 1991, Blumenthal, 1980), and the intrusion of media logic in politics (see, e.g., Garland, 2017, Marcinkowski, 2014, van Aelst et al., 2008).

However, those debates have often focused on electoral instead of routine periods, on political parties, governments and frontbenchers rather than backbenchers. Even the work focusing more generally on parliamentarians' communication or work output, the contributions of parliamentary assistants, who are heavily involved in creating those outputs, often remained unacclaimed. Generally, very little research has focused on PAs' roles and activities, and even less has been undertaken on their role and practices in political communication and media management on behalf of parliamentarians. The lack of recognition of their relevance goes beyond their absence from scholarly discussions; even in public debates, little attention is paid to them. The former speaker of the House of Commons, Rt Hon John Bercow, referred to them as "unsung heroes" (Dale, 2015, para. 1), given the little acknowledgement they receive for their contributions. The absence of this critical figure in debates on parliamentary work has been noted in and outside the research community without leading to a concerted effort to address this gap. Perhaps it is unsurprising that even less is known about the workplace interactions between parliamentary assistants employed by individual parliamentarians; only a few studies have looked into these dynamics. Neither the academic community nor the public recognises or debates their relevance in supporting parliamentarians in fulfilling their duties and responsibilities in greater depth, including casework, communication, or research-related tasks.

The negligence is problematic for two reasons. First, Scotland's parliamentarians are directly elected rather than elected through a party list². While voters often decide whom to vote for based on the candidate's party affiliation, the First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) system has a crucial personal element, even informing the campaigning activities of contestants. Considering that most voters have not met the parliamentarian in person, the only pieces of information they have about them are the coverage in the media and

² All Members of the Parliament (House of Commons) are directly elected and constituency-mandated. The Scottish electoral system is mixed, but 57% of all mandates distributed through direct-election and only 43% of the remaining seats are allocated through party lists.

the communication released on behalf of the parliamentarian. This thesis will show that news coverage and communication on behalf of the parliamentarian are directly and indirectly shaped by the parliamentary assistants working for those parliamentarians. Consequently, what they know and perceive through traditional and social media is heavily influenced by PAs, without their contribution being recognised and understood by the recipients. Voting for the individual parliamentarian is, therefore, not just a vote for the candidate but also a vote for the working results produced by their PAs; without that, the vote is aware that the communication output is a result of a group or team effort of MPs' and MSPs' staff. Arguably, this conflicts with the notion of having an informed choice, which is why understanding the role of parliamentary assistants is of public importance.

Second, the scholarly debates in political science on mediatisation, a conceptualisation describing the growing influence and intrusion of the operating logic, values, and perception of mass media actors (also known as media logic) into politics (Landerer, 2013, Mazzoleni, 2008b), have not considered to what extent parliamentary assistants might be affected or mirror those developments. Discussion on the professionalisation of politics and political communication, which often focus on employing experts in political settings and integrating techniques and methods from marketing and PR contexts in politics (Karlsen and Saglie, 2017, Negrine and Lilleker, 2002), also rarely feature PAs. It is unclear whether or to what extent professionalisation shapes recruitment, staff development and relationships with staff members. It is equally unknown to what degree mediatisation influences the practices employed by parliamentary assistants, especially in their work on communication output and media management on behalf of parliamentarians. The small number of studies on PAs already indicates their significant influence on the work output of parliamentarians. Therefore, it would be imperative to consider parliamentary assistants in scholarly debates on the professionalisation and mediatisation of politics, especially in political systems with powerful parliaments. However, given that PAs are largely neglected, those debates risk remaining incomplete, if not deficient, particularly when they evaluate the politics of modern, developed democracies.

The glaring gap in the literature and the aforementioned debates becomes apparent when contrasting the lack of knowledge on parliamentary assistants with the large body of research on spin doctors. The term spin doctor usually refers to media advisors and PR

consultants employed by political actors to manage relations with media stakeholders to establish a favourable position in the media environment. Those media advisors often have substantial, relevant experiences, e.g., acquired by having worked as journalists or in a communication- and media-focused role (see, e.g., Hobbs, 2016, Esser et al., 2000, Sumpter and Tankard, 1994). In contrast, PAs with communication-related duties are often inexperienced and involved in various non-communication tasks (e.g., research, casework) within the parliamentary office (see Chapters 8 and 9). The rise of spin doctors addresses the core of the debates on the professionalisation and mediatization of politics. Spin doctors have been subject to significant research activity, particularly on their practices, their impact on public and media discourse, and normative implications for democracies. Their emergence addresses professionalisation debates since their growing importance significantly professionalised the external communication of critical political actors (e.g., governments, political parties and frontbenchers). With their background in communication and media-related professions, they are also the epitome of the intrusion of media logic into politics by introducing and integrating media values, perceptions and operating logic into politics and policy-making. Parliamentary assistants, arguably, perform similar communication and media-related tasks for parliamentarians. Still, the research interest in communication specialists and media advisors in politics has not been extended to them and their activities. This research project will address the lack of knowledge and evaluate their practices when performing political communication-related tasks and managing media relations on behalf of parliamentarians. In particular, it explores the importance of political communication and media relations for parliamentary offices during routine periods, how those relations are managed, and how communication-related tasks are organised, planned and performed.

The next chapter will provide the groundwork for evaluating the parliamentary assistant's role in political communication on behalf of parliamentarians. It will evaluate the literature focusing on transformation in the public sphere and changes in the media landscape, which preceded and accompanied the professionalisation of political communication and intrusion of media logic in politics. The focus will then shift towards mediatization theory. It will discuss permanent campaigning, classifying it as a response of political actors to those structural changes in the public sphere and media landscape. The permanent campaigning concept introduced by Blumenthal (1980) will

serve two purposes in the literature review. First, it will illustrate the importance and need to focus on political communication during routine periods. Second, it will provide a conceptual link to the next chapter, which will discuss the rise of spin doctors in the political arena. The connection between permanent campaigning and the emergence of spin doctors will be addressed in two ways. The first point of connection is permanent campaigning, which is characterised by including professional actors who are able to influence media and public opinion, which illustrates the role of spin doctors. Second, it describes how consideration towards the next elections starts to influence and guide politicians shortly after their election. With this, the difference between governing and campaigning blurs and it explains the rising importance of spin doctors in the first place. At the same time, it echoes the debate on mediatisation signified by the intrusion of media logic in politics. Facilitating and addressing media values and expectations is essential for spin doctors and their contribution to a successful permanent campaign.

In chapter three, the focus will be on spin doctors. It puts its emphasis on the interplay between politics and media as well as the techniques and approaches employed by spin doctors to manage media-politics relations. The first part will primarily focus on those relations and how politics and media influence and perceive each other. It provides insight into the environment in which spin doctors operate. The second part of this chapter will look at the role and scope of spin doctoring, which also considers the rising importance of social media. In particular, the extent to which those changes impact spin doctors' activities will be discussed. Crucially, this chapter will also set the scene for the reflections on the state of research on parliamentary assistants, which will follow in chapter four. It will support the reader in understanding the similarities between those two roles, particularly compared with parliamentary assistants with communication-related duties and responsibilities in media management.

The fourth chapter, dedicated to the fragmented and limited body of research on parliamentary assistants, will first provide a short introduction to the research on PAs and what is known about their role and influence. Parliamentary assistants, in the context of this research, are the assistants and staff members designated and employed by individual parliamentarians. The second part of this chapter will focus on two critical areas of responsibility of parliamentary assistants: political communication and media relations. This section will employ a comparative approach by reviewing available literature on case studies in Australia and the UK. The section will draw primarily on

research on spin doctors and media consultants and outline the parallels to parliamentary assistants tasked with political communication and media management on behalf of MPs. While there is not much known about the practices of parliamentary assistants, it will at least provide a first insight into possible techniques and approaches they might utilise. This chapter aims to show the significant gaps in the literature on this topic, which will feed into formulating the research questions, which will be outlined in the next chapter.

The fifth chapter will discuss research on campaigning and political communication in Scotland. The first part will be divided into two sections, one on the political system of Scotland and political campaigning since devolution was introduced in 1999. It will outline current trends and developments that might affect parliamentary assistants' roles and practices in political communication and media management on behalf of parliamentarians. The second section will shift the focus from the more general trends in campaigning towards campaigning in the context of the voting system for the elections for the Scottish Parliament. The last part of the chapter will conclude by referring back to the arguments made in previous sections and chapters to outline the research questions and explain to what extent answering those would address the gaps of knowledge identified throughout the four literature review chapters.

The sixth chapter will provide an analytical framework which will support answering the research questions. It is divided into four sections. The overarching theories for the analytical framework are the concepts of professionalisation and mediatisation. They will be explained and operationalised in the first section of the chapter. The following sections will lay out three sub-frameworks, one for each findings chapter but embedded in the framework of mediatisation and professionalisation. The first sub-framework will outline the principal-agent theory, which will be used for analysing the relationship between PAs and parliamentarians. The focus will be, in particular, on the underlying problems of hidden characteristics, hidden intention and hidden action, which characterise the relationship between the principal (the parliamentarian) and agent (the parliamentary assistant). The following section will utilise the debate around the differentiation between groups and teams to develop a suitable framework that helps to conceptualise the interactions between parliamentary assistants on communication-related tasks in parliamentary offices. This framework will also be used to characterise the relationships between the different parliamentary offices. The last section will

introduce an analytical sub-framework for the third findings chapter. It will focus on operationalising theories on news values and newsworthiness, which will be used to conceptualise media management and political communication practices of PAs. Additionally, the section will introduce strategy, tactics, proactivity, and reactivity concepts in communication contexts to support the assessment of those practices. This sub-framework will then be used to make preliminary considerations on the PA's approaches by reflecting on possible options for group and team efforts between parliamentary offices and potentials for pursuing party and personal votes in the Scottish context. The chapter's conclusion will briefly strengthen the connection between those analytical sub-frameworks in the broader context of professionalisation and mediatisation.

The methodology chapter will outline this research project's ontological and epistemological foundation. After that, it will present the research design and case study selection. To ensure the suitability and appropriateness of the research design, Tracy's "big tent" (Tracy, 2010) criteria will be introduced to assess the quality of the chosen methodological approach. The methodology will outline the qualitative approach for collecting and analysing data. The "big tent" criteria were developed for qualitative undertakings, which is why they are particularly suitable for providing a reliable framework to assess the quality of this study. The last section of this chapter will be dedicated to research ethics and reflect on potential problems caused by the chosen approach. Those reflections are embedded in the evaluation of the research quality and need to be understood as a methodological key consideration for this study.

The eighth chapter discusses the findings by focusing on the relationship between parliamentarians and PAs responsible for political communication and media management. The term "communication officer", in the context of this thesis, will be used interchangeably for any PA who is regularly involved in communication-related tasks on behalf of parliamentarians. The chapter will demonstrate that the interactions between both are best understood through the lens of the principal-agent theory, particularly in the recruitment and the degrees of exerted control over outgoing communication. The different approaches parliamentarians take will be conceptualised by forming three ideal types illustrating the interplay between trust, PA's autonomy, workload and exerted control by the parliamentarian. Additionally, the findings will be used to develop a lifecycle of a communication officer, which conceptualises the

process of professionalisation by the parliamentary assistants responsible for political communication and media management. The findings of this chapter are discussed in the broader context of professionalisation and mediatisation. It will be shown that while both manifest in the relationship between parliamentarians and parliamentary assistants, there are clear limitations. The high turnover rate and the exerted control by parliamentarians significantly impede the process of acquiring expertise and experience and shaping content and presentation, which minimises opportunities to develop output that addresses the expectations of media stakeholders.

The ninth chapter will present the findings concerning the communication-task-related interactions between PAs in parliamentary offices. The findings show that the organisation of parliamentary offices and, with them, the division of communication and media-related labour is set up according to the parliamentarian's preferences. Consequently, each office has an idiosyncratic structure. However, those structures can be conceptualised by using the distinctions between groups and teams, whereby teams are more interactive and less specialised with a flexible, situation-driven allocation of tasks. Group structures are more common and are characterised by fixed designation of roles. In practice, group structures are more common but usually have moderate interaction and collaboration on communication tasks, somewhat blurring the distinction between groups and teams. The arrangements are best understood considering the consequences of accountability and opportunities to professionalise, as well as the exposure towards staff turnover. Group arrangements limit vulnerability since they contain the loss of experience and skill in a specific area. However, it also limits the exposure to communication-related tasks for the PAs involved since they will be more involved in tasks unrelated to communication and media.

Team arrangements reinforce the tendency to limit exposure to communication duties, which minimises opportunities for learning-by-doing. Additionally, individuals have limited autonomy and control over the communication output because of the more interactive nature of those arrangements. Effectively, because of the mutual oversight among parliamentary assistants involved in those tasks, clan control is established, limiting the chance of producing and distributing politically damaging communication output on behalf of the parliamentarian. In light of this, it will be argued that group and team arrangements limit professionalisation processes and somewhat contradict the notion of an intrusion of media logic. Adapting to media stakeholders' expectations and

logic requires acquiring experiences and learning; hampering this process will minimise media logic's intrusion into operations and external communication of parliamentary offices.

The tenth chapter will discuss the findings around the practices of PAs undertaking communication and media-related tasks. It will show that parliamentary assistants pursue producing newsworthy content to maximise the reach of their communication output. It also needs to be noted that news values relevant to social media are becoming increasingly important. However, in most cases, social media platforms are still used one-directional for distributing information rather than utilising it in an interactive and engaging way. Relations to media and the production of communication output are often reactive and tactical rather than strategic and proactive. However, it was possible to identify strategic and proactive elements in the pursuit of newsworthiness for approaches by parliamentary offices, such as dividing up electoral regions and shadowing constituencies. Another important finding is that the electoral systems of Scotland and the United Kingdom are reflected in their practices. This is particularly obvious in their focus on local media and pursuing personal rather than party votes. However, there are differences between parliamentary offices affiliated with small Parliamentary Party Groups (PPGs) and medium- or large-sized PPGs. The former encourages greater collaboration and an almost team-like political communication approach between parliamentary offices. Consequently, there is a greater tendency to foster party votes than in medium- or large-sized PPGs, which tend to follow a less integrated, group-like approach. The findings are discussed in the context of professionalisation and mediatisation trends, arguing that, similar to the previous chapter, manifestations of both developments are visible but limited. The limitations are due to personal and structural constraints, including staff turnover and limited professionalisation, as well as mandate type (list v constituency mandate), seniority, and influence (frontbencher v backbencher).

The final chapter of this thesis will address the research questions, outline the limitations and map out possible avenues for future research. The answers demonstrate that the mediatisation and professionalisation theories manifest in the practices and arrangements to organise and perform political communication and manage media relations. However, it is crucial to understand that political communication is just as important as other areas. Similarly, media logic is present in PAs' working practices and

arrangements but is not fully integrated. This is due to structural constraints, parliamentarians' preferences, and the reactive nature of the involved activities. However, due to the qualitative nature of this study, those findings are not generalisable and should be used as a starting point for further investigations instead. Comparative approaches, quantitative and mixed method research designs could help to understand in future studies whether those findings are characteristic of the Scottish case only or if and to what extent the findings represent the role of parliamentary assistants beyond Scotland and the UK. The thesis would not just provide a novel contribution to the vast body of literature on mediatisation in politics or the professionalisation of political communication. It would also be the starting point for fruitful research on the "unsung heroes" of parliaments – the parliamentary assistants.

2 The Structural Transformation of Public Communication

In the past few decades, scholars (see, e.g., Graber and Dunaway, 2017, Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2016, Guggenheim et al., 2015, Walgrave, 2008, Strohmeier, 2004, Herman and Chomsky, 2002, Habermas, 1990) have analysed the trend towards an increasingly dominant role of mass media in political communication. Mass media are widely accepted as platforms crucial for public opinion formation and a significant target for political campaigns. Political communicators were increasingly willing to professionalise their efforts and adopt the operating logic of mass media actors to maximise the intended outcome of their efforts. Closely linked with this development is the rise of 'spin doctors' (see, e.g., Garland, 2017, McKnight, 2015, Newman, 2010, Miller and Dinan, 2008, 2000, Esser et al., 2000, Ewen, 1996, Carey, 1997).

Spin doctors are communication experts responsible for managing the relations between media representatives and politician(s), aiming to ensure favourable news coverage for their employers (see, e.g., McKnight, 2015, Esser et al., 2000, Sumpter and Tankard, 1994). These communication experts' emergence mirrors two critical developments, mediatisation and professionalisation of politics, which will be addressed in this and the following literature review chapters. While spin doctors, as will be shown in Chapters 3 and 4, are different to parliamentary assistants responsible for communication tasks, they share some features similar to these PAs (compare Fisher, 2014, with Phillipps, 2003). Consequently, understanding the changes in the public sphere and the media landscape is a prerequisite for understanding the rise and role of spin doctors and parliamentary assistants trusted with communicating on behalf of parliamentarians.

This literature review chapter identifies crucial changes in the communicative relationship between citizens and political actors, which laid the foundation for the rise of public relations professionals and communication experts in political communication processes. It will provide information about the context and critical developments shaping the communication and media environment in which parliamentary assistants operate. The first section focuses on platforms and public communication spheres that have emerged since the 1950s. The second section will focus on the intrusion of media logic into the political sphere and the subsequent changes in how mass media communicate political matters. After that, an overview of political actors' reactions to those systematic changes in the relationship between those who govern and those who are governed will be provided. The chapter will conclude by introducing the concept of

permanent campaigning as a phenomenon of structural change in the political sphere, providing an entry point for the discussion on the role of spin doctors in the political communication context presented in the next chapter.

2.1 The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere

The public sphere as a concept achieved prominence with the publication of "Der Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit" by Habermas (1962). It has been established as an analytical instrument to understand and investigate discursive interactions. "The public sphere" has been conceptualised as an ideal type (see Weber, 1922) of a public forum, very similar to theories on the marketplace of ideas (see Ferree et al., 2002), on which citizens exchange their views, deliberate and inform themselves on matters of public importance. With this, it becomes an instrument for the citizenry to scrutinise their elites (Rasmussen, 2016, Gerhards and Schäfer, 2010, Dahlgren, 2005). The information and the perspectives exchanged in this space merge and streamline into thematic bundles of public opinions; they serve as communicative links between those who govern and those who are governed.

In theory, the public sphere is a source of information and deliberation for elected representatives and the electorate in modern democracies. According to Habermas' model (1990), communication in the public sphere entails a wide variety of relevant topics, evaluations and arguments. Whilst communicative processes in the public sphere were traditionally through face-to-face communication and public events, Habermas (1990) observed an ongoing structural transformation of public communication due to the emergence of mass media, i.e. newspapers and the growing importance of radio broadcasters. Focusing on ownership and control over the publication process, he emphasises that a newly emerged advertising industry would use mass media for its activities and undermine its function as a platform for deliberation and sharing information. Habermas (1990) describes the newly 'mediated public sphere' as a space where the transition of political and societal deliberation to the mediatised realm³ has led to a situation where a range of state, civic and commercial actors occupy this space for deliberation, sharing views and information. Ordinary people are usually relegated

³ The concept of mediatisation refers to the expansion and integration of mass media into the different aspects of the social, political and cultural life of modern societies (see, e.g., Marcinkowski, 2014, Esser, 2013, Hjavard, 2008). The debate on mediatisation of politics is discussed later in this chapter.

to the passive role of receiving information by those actors who court them as consumers rather than addressing them as citizens. However, Habermas's evaluation of the changes in the communicative relationship between the public and politicians is based on specific requirements, further discussed in his theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1988a, 1988b). Citizens need "access to the same news content [...], deliberate and debate about solutions". The best arguments would prevail in those envisaged debates, and agreements are "based on reason, not force or privilege" (Howard, 2011, p. 40). It can be argued that those conditions are unrealistic: they require a comparatively high degree of interest among citizens participating in those deliberations while being open for reason without being "unreasonably" partisan. First, it is questionable whether most people are sufficiently interested in political and social matters that they would be willing to debate and deliberate openly. Second, it is also open to which requirements would need to be fulfilled to qualify an agreement as reasonable, given the role of emotions, identity and beliefs on stances in political debates about social matters. However, Garnham (2007) defends Habermas' public sphere theory by highlighting that it derives its value from providing a "perspective from which to think" (ibid., p. 203) about contemporary problems in modern democracies (such as communicative changes in relations between citizens and politicians and developments of the public discourse). Garnham argues that it was not necessarily Habermas' intention to offer a thick and accurate description of "a concrete space or set of discursive practices" (ibid.).

The concept of the public sphere was conceived before the emergence of the internet and social media and before significant changes in the traditional mass media landscape (e.g., increasing commercialisation, diversification of media content), which are now shaping the public realm (Gaber, 2016, Gripsrud and Moe, 2010, Castells, 2008, Temple, 2006). Habermas has also acknowledged those developments and published an update to "Der Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit" sixty years after its release (Habermas, 2022). Observing these different changes, political communication scholars have argued to what extent the mass media could function as a democratic forum where citizens could discuss public matters and hold the powerful accountable (i.e. Placek, 2017, Rasmussen, 2016, Boydston, 2013, Aalberg et al., 2010, Livingstone and Lunt, 1994). Gerhards and Schäfer (2010) concluded in their study comparing the highest-ranked internet sources prompted by popular search engines and coverage by national

quality print media on human genome research in the USA and Germany that there are clear limitations. They found no significant differences in how this issue has been covered in offline media outlets compared to online media. One of the main discussions among scholars concerns how mass media respond to economic and regulatory pressures, specifically reflecting the observed shift of mass media from a public service model towards a market model. The rising importance of media consultants and communication professionals for advising political actors has been associated with this shift. Given the similarities of their roles with those of parliamentary assistants communicating on behalf of parliamentarians, those shifts are equally crucial to understanding the activities and functions of those PAs as political communicators. The debates around the emergence of spin doctors (see, e.g., McKnight, 2015, Rawnsley, 2001, Ornstein and Mann, 2000, Friedenber, 1997, Blumenthal, 1980) focus, in particular, on the techniques and methods utilised by them to shape the news coverage provided by media outlets. Debates on these developments have not just been held by the political communication scholarship (McKnight, 2015, Strömbäck and Esser, 2014, Quinn, 2012, Esser and Spanier, 2005) but also addressed by research on journalism (Barnoy, 2022, Macnamara, 2015, Strömbäck, 2011). Overall, these developments are embedded in a broader social-political change of the decline of mass parties, the shrinking importance of party identification and the rise of swing voters and catch-all parties (see, e.g., Greene, 2021, Strohmeier, 2004, Krouwel, 2003). Manin (1997) describes the undergoing developments in political communication as being due to a transformation of democracies from being party-driven towards audience-driven. The rising importance of emphasising the personality and image of politicians incentivises the utilisation of political marketing and the attempt to package and control the framing of political messaging (see, e.g., Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2016, Gaber, 2016, Hänggli, 2011, Franklin, 2004b).

The arrival of the "digital revolution" triggered debates on new discursive possibilities through technological changes and was reflected in scholarly discussion on the transformation of the public sphere. Scholars found the public sphere to become more interaction-oriented, inclusive and complex by applying newly developed information technologies for public communication (Rasmussen, 2016, Dahlgren, 2005). Accordingly, the development of internet technologies has been discussed in light of their ability to enrich public communication and their value as a platform of public

debate competing with the mass media. While still holding on to the previous discussion on the role of the media, a networked citizen-centred perspective has been debated (see e.g. van Dijk and Hacker, 2018, Rasmussen, 2014, van Dijk, 2012). In this view, citizens who inhabit this newly emerging digital sphere and use the communication and networking tools it provides can autonomously choose to connect with each other or different spheres they are interested in. Consequently, scholars argued that those changes could transform established power relations of communication (see, e.g., Leadbeater, 2010, Benkler, 2006, Jenkins, 2006). Castells (2009) even concluded that these developments, due to the rising importance of the internet, changed the nature of mass communication; it would now be mass self-communication. Arguably, the rising importance of social media supports his argument that characterises this transformation process as blurring boundaries between mass communication and other forms of communication. While traditional mass communication is mainly one-way and barely interactive, mass communication in the digital age is highly individualised and instead "lived with" (ibid., p. 64) rather than passively consumed. Loader and Mercea (2011) agree with this conclusion and add that public and private mass media now face a new type of competitor where citizens can share alternative views and opinions. The internet (and social media) provides them with platforms on which they can put their perspectives on display, exposing them to a large audience while bypassing traditional gatekeepers of traditional mass media (e.g. journalists, editors, media producers). Castells (2009) further highlights the potential of social media to provide platforms for social movements on which activists and campaigners can connect, share their views and experiences, and pursue their goals for enacting change in politics and society. Arguably, studies, for example, on Obama's presidential campaign in 2008 (Howard, 2011, p. 41), #MeToo (Armstrong and Mahone, 2021, Xiong et al., 2019) and "Fridays for Future" (Pickard, 2022), reinforce this view on the political and social potential of social media. Consequently, practitioners of political communication, such as spin doctors and parliamentary assistants, will need to account for and adjust their activities to the potential and opportunities of direct, unmediated communication with voters on social media.

Additionally, to Castells' contributions in the debate about the new possibilities of social media platforms for reconfiguring the communicative link between power holders and citizens, there are two further counterpoints to make. First, the evaluation concerning

social media's inclusiveness has been challenged due to its capacity to fragment debate. Some scholars (e.g. Sunstein, 2001, Shapiro, 1999, but also on political or ideological homophily by Boutyline and Willer, 2017, and Colleoni et al., 2014) have argued that politically interested participants on social media platforms show to varying degrees the tendency to be more likely to interact with persons who share their political views and values. The results of those studies somewhat contradict the positive perception of social media's inclusiveness since debates on those platforms are often held among like-minded persons rather than among citizens with a wide range of perspectives.⁴ Accordingly, the ability of those social media platforms to provide an opportunity to hold elected representatives accountable is limited. Second, several studies, like the ones by Harder et al. (2017) and Groshek and Groshek (2013), conclude that traditional (mass) media actors have a significant impact on the agenda of social media platforms. Their findings show that using those platforms as an instrument to reconfigure the communication between citizens and politicians to challenge the monopoly of mass media and hold elected representatives into account is less promising than the initial positive perception of the technological changes suggested. Although the controversies on the impact of social media on public communication and political processes are still ongoing (e.g., Castanho Silva and Proksch, 2022, Elmer et al., 2012, Bohman, 2004), they illustrate the significance of new technologies in the ongoing transformation of the communicative link between citizens and decision-makers of society.

The developments observed by Habermas (1962) and the opportunities provided through emerging social media platforms, as discussed in the literature (see, e.g., Harder et al., 2017, Boutyline and Willer, 2017, Rasmussen, 2016, Loader and Mercea, 2011, Leadbeater, 2010, Dahlgren, 2005, Shapiro, 1999), brought significant changes to the communicative link between citizens and power holders of the society. Those changes result in a state of society where communicative political battles are mainly fought through social media platforms and mass media, even though traditional face-to-face communication or public events remain relevant. However, high expectations (see, e.g., Leadbeater, 2010, Benkler, 2006, Jenkins, 2006) for the opportunities of social media

⁴ The fragmentation and segmentation of networks rather than having one network society mirrors the ongoing social change towards more fragmented societies within West Europe which is going to be discussed in the next section.

platforms might not have yet been realised (see, e.g., Batorski and Grzywińska, 2018, Rasmussen, 2016, Colleoni et al., 2014, van Dijck, 2012).

2.2 The Mediatisation of the Political Sphere

The growing importance of mass media and social media platforms as a forum for public communication is not limited to their function as a communicative link between political decision-makers and the governed. The mediatisation theory addresses this trend by describing a development in which mass media and its underlying logic transformed politics and society. The process of the mediatisation of politics describes perceptual and behavioural shifts not just among politicians but also among citizens in how they approach and evaluate politics. This process is embedded into broader societal changes in which society adopts media logic, which refers to the reasoning, views and perceptions of reality that have previously been typical for media actors (such as journalists, editors, etc.) only. The increasing intrusion of media logic into the political sphere altered the underlying rules governing politics. It incentivised political actors to integrate the attitudes and behaviours of media actors in their communications with the public (see, e.g., Marcinkowski, 2014, Strömbäck and Esser, 2014, Esser and Matthes, 2013, Elmelund-Præstekær et al., 2011). The emergence of media advisors, who are tasked to address those attitudes and behaviours of media stakeholders, needs to be understood in this context.

One of the most prominent models conceptualising the mediatisation of politics has been provided by Strömbäck (2008). He describes it as a process undergoing four stages, the final result being the integration and permeation of media logic in the political system. The increasing dominance of media as the key provider of information for and about politics characterises the first stage of Strömbäck's model. The second stage sees increased media autonomy from political institutions; Maurer and Pfetsch (2014) suggest that most Western European democracies have already achieved the first two stages. In the third stage, media logic starts replacing political logic in political actors' thinking. Political and media logic refer to two distinctly different ways to perceive, organise and process reality. Political logic is characterised by the way political actors utilise their power and set policies, and it also includes a unique set of norms and rules which regulate those processes. In contrast, media logic refers to how media actors understand and process social, cultural and political phenomena (Altheide, 2016,

Landerer, 2013, Esser, 2013). The fourth stage of the model on mediatisation proposed by Strömbäck (2008) completes the process of integrating media logic into politics; political actors now have media logic fully internalised and act accordingly. Studies assessing the mediatisation of politics (see, e.g., Garland, 2017, Casero-Ripollés et al., 2016, Helfer, 2016a, van Santen et al., 2015) indicate that most Western democracies have already completed the third or the fourth stage. Consequently, it can also be assumed that mediatisation has a significant impact on how parliamentary assistants perform their role in political communication on behalf of MPs.

The interplay between mass media and politics is at the heart of the mediatisation debate; one of the critical debates addresses who influences whom and to what extent. The notion that mass media would merely be a passive instrument of communication for political actors has been rejected since media follows its own logic and interests. This has been particularly visible in how the media frames politics in its news coverage and how political actors accommodate this approach. The framing by media of political processes is often dominated by covering politics as an ongoing competition between political contestants (see, e.g., Cushion et al., 2016, Elmelund-Præstekær and Svensson, 2014, Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999). Consequently, the audience's focus shifts more towards questions of electoral victory and failure rather than considerations of policy processes. News coverage of politics under those conditions is characterised by oversimplification, the dominance of negative framing, and the focus on conflicts between prominent political actors and politicians' private lives (see, e.g., Campus, 2020b, Casero-Ripollés et al., 2016, Van Aelst et al., 2011, Strohmeier, 2004). The dominance of media logic leads to focusing on political strategy instead of policies in news reporting. It emphasises the conflict between political actors rather than compromise, and it incorporates elements of entertainment into political news (see debate on infotainment, e.g., Browning and Sweetser, 2014, Jebril et al., 2013, Grondin, 2012, Brants, 1998; see also debate on politainment, e.g., Dörner and Vogt, 2017, Müller, 2013, Saxer, 2007, Dörner, 2001). Political actors need to consider all aspects of media logic if they want to communicate successfully through mass media with the public (see, e.g., Landerer, 2014, Maurer and Pfetsch, 2014). The differentiation between symbolic and substantial agendas of Members of Parliament (MPs) by Vesa et al. (2015) is a helpful illustration of the effects of *media logic* on politics. Their work distinguishes between strategies and content for topics that dominate publicly visible

discussions and those political processes behind closed doors. Considering their argument, Figure 1 illustrates the intrusion of the mass media into the political sphere, its role as a communicative link between the public and political actors, and crucial intersection points between the different spheres.

Although mass media and its logic are increasingly important and have become vital in public debates and communication between political decision-makers and the public, it is unclear to what extent mass media can influence the public and political decision-makers. There is an ongoing debate about whether mass media influences or is influenced by political actors (see, e.g., Crow and Lawlor, 2016, Habel, 2012, Newman, 2010, Brandenburg, 2002) and whether and to what extent politics and media can move public opinion (see, e.g., Kosho, 2016, Habel, 2012, Shanahan et al., 2011, Craig, 2004).

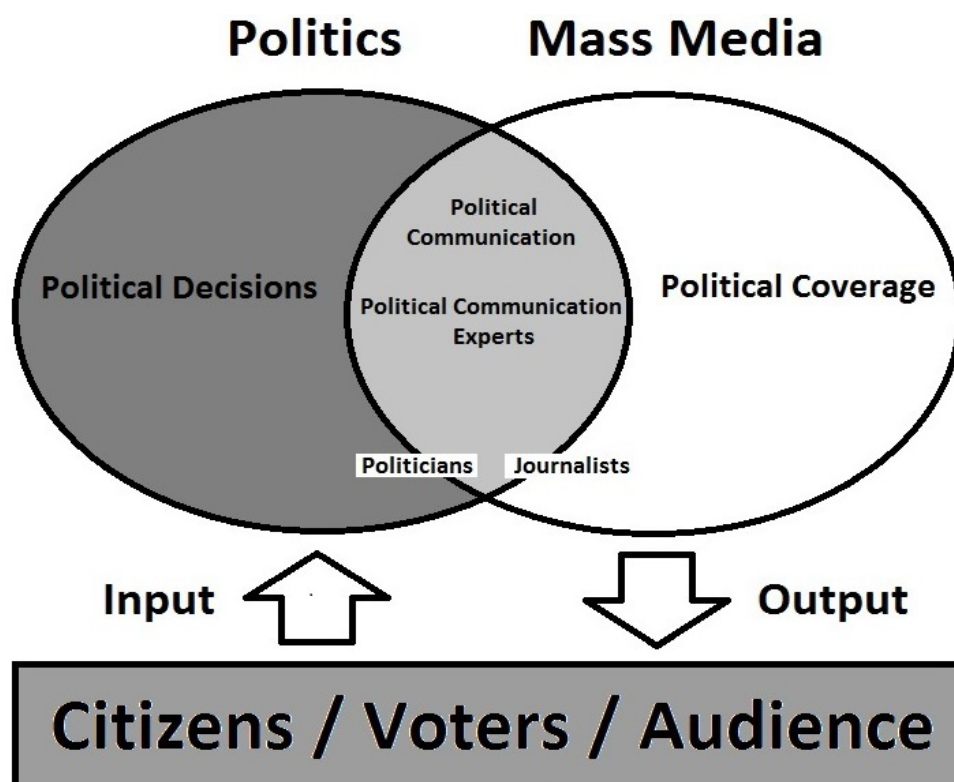


Figure 1 Political communication as symbiosis (Tenscher, 2004, p. 518)

While the direction of influence between political and media actors is subject to debate, there is an agreement on the increasing relevance of the politician as an individual in the news coverage. The focus on individual persons, their personalities, and private lives rather than organisations (e.g., parties), ideologies, and policies have been conceptualised as personalisation. Personalisation of political news is increasingly important when conveying political messages (see, e.g., Lobo, 2017, den Herder, 2013,

Boumans et al., 2013, Langer, 2011). The increasing interest in the phenomenon created a substantial body of literature. Still, diverging methodological and conceptual approaches have led to mixed and, at times, contradicting results (for a discussion, see, e.g. Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014, Van Aelst et al., 2011). For instance, those differences become more apparent when comparing McAllister (2007) with Karvonen (2009). While the former concludes that party leaders became more visible at the expense of their parties during the campaigns, Karvonen (2009) only finds mixed evidence of personalisation across Western democracies, contradicting McAllister (2007). It is not surprising that the conceptualisation of personalisation has become increasingly complex by trying to address relevant dimensions.⁵

The prominent conceptualisation of *personalisation* by Van Aelst et al. (2011) in Figure 2 addresses two critical dimensions, *individualisation* and *privatisation* (see also Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014, Kriesi, 2011, Langer, 2011). *Individualisation* refers to the tendency to emphasise individual politicians (see, e.g., Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014) instead of the collective bodies they represent (e.g., the union leader rather than the trade union, the party leaders rather than their parties). Van Aelst et al. (2011) see individualisation as embedded in interconnected social developments: voters' weakened party identification and the transformation of the mass media environment. The individualisation trend addresses the news' focus on individual politicians and the increased visibility of political leaders.

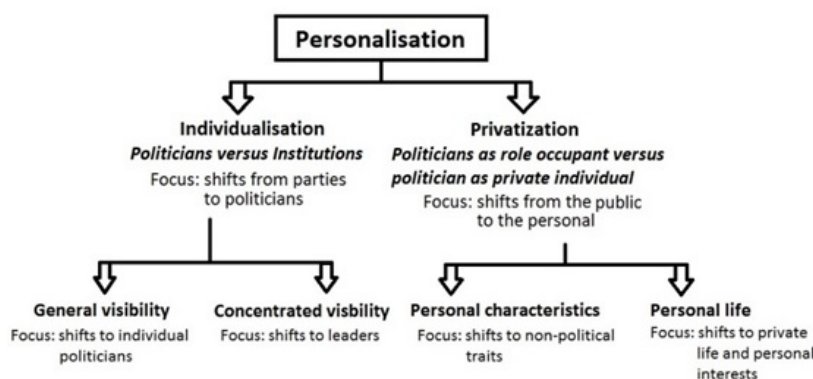


Figure 2 Dimensions of Personalisation (Van Aelst et al., 2011, p. 207)

⁵ Another important factor influencing the degree of personalisation is the electoral system: Plurality and Majoritarian voting systems as well as presidential elections incentivise highly personalised campaigns. On the other hand, proportional voting systems give incentives to individual campaigners to rather focus on parties than on individual candidates (see, e.g., Gschwend and Zittel, 2015, Enli and Skogerbo, 2013, Pachón and Shugart, 2010, Carey and Shugart, 1995, Cain et al., 1987). The role of the voting system in the electoral campaigns and political communication will be subject to further discussions in the next sections.

Privatisation in the conceptualisation of *personalisation* by Van Aelst et al. (2011) focuses on the personalities and personal lives of individuals who are increasingly the focus of mass media. In other words, the focus shifted away from the experiences and skills of the individual politician to more trivial aspects of them as persons (see also Campus, 2020b, Helfer, 2016b, Serazio, 2017). Holtz-Bacha et al. (2014) proposed to include locus and timeframe in the conceptualisation of personalisation. Locus refers, in this context, to where personalisation is utilised (e.g., communication by parties, news coverage). The time frame addresses periods when communication is undertaken (e.g., routine periods compared to election periods). *Personalisation* as a trend in political communication and a concept is subject to an ongoing debate, which now also includes how political actors perceive, react and utilise personalisation in their political communication (see, e.g., Townsley et al., 2022, Peng, 2021, Casero-Ripollés et al., 2016). Consequently, PAs' political communication practices on behalf of parliamentarians will need to be understood in this context.

Personalisation has also been researched in the UK context. A range of studies has addressed, in particular, media coverage and electoral campaigns. Karvonen (2009), for example, approaches the topic comparatively across four dimensions. For personalisation in the mass media, which is one of the dimensions, he discusses the media coverage of the former UK Prime Ministers Blair and Brown in *The Times*, utilising the results of Langer (2006). Karvonen concludes that during Margaret Thatcher's term as Prime Minister, news coverage and framing became more personal and focused on personal qualities (e.g., leadership traits), confirming the hypothesis of increasingly personalised political reporting. A more recent study by Pedersen and van Heerde-Hudson (2019) compares the personalisation in the self-representation of MPs on their official websites, observing a higher degree of personalisation among British parliamentarians. They argue that this would be due to the UK's political system, which illustrates that contextual factors significantly impact how personalisation manifests. Townsley et al. (2022) provide a nuanced counterpoint with their study on the personalisation of MPs' electoral campaigns by highlighting clear limitations. While personalised elements are utilised in those campaigns, they argue that candidates would refrain from using the full range of personalisation options. They also found that the profile and background of the politician play a significant role in their decision-making process on the extent of personalising their campaigning activities. Deacon and Harmer

(2019) reinforce that view in their study on the news coverage for the General Elections from 1918 to 2015. They conclude that personalisation in the UK's media coverage has a comparatively strong legacy, and while elements of the personalisation theory can be observed, there is no evidence that matters of the private life of individual politicians would become dominant. The notion of increasing attention to politicians' personalities in media coverage has also not been confirmed.

However, a vast body of literature on British politics supports the increasing importance of the personalisation of politics, e.g., particularly with a focus on critical political actors like the prime minister and party leaders (Poguntke and Webb, 2013, Kriesi, 2011, Heffernan, 2006, Foley, 2000). Mughan (2000), Langer (2011), and Boumans et al. (2013) find positive overall trends in the relative media visibility of leaders over time, the former for elections and the latter two during routine periods. Street (2004) calls them celebrity politicians and cites the rise of television and the commercialisation of journalism as reasons for their emergence.

These developments need to be put in the context of social change and its implications for the political landscape and media consumption. Since the Second World War, the fragmentation and individualisation of society have led to a decline in party membership, less party identification and lower voting turnout. The deterioration of voters' party ties increased the volatility of their electoral choices. The increasing diversity of voter groups has led to diversifying targeting methods to promote one's political positions. This development resulted in the emergence of "catch-all parties" and a general increase in the effective number of parties in Western democracies, especially in those with proportional representation voting systems. The changes within media mirrored those changes and tried to address the social change by adjusting how it reaches out to its readers and viewers depending on the particular characteristics of its consumers. Political actors needed to address the changes within society and, with it, the need to change their methods for acquiring political support, as well as considering in their adjustments that mass media is also reacting to those social changes (see, e.g., Serazio, 2014, Leach et al., 2011, Holtz-Bacha, 2006, Strohmeier, 2004, 2002, Krouwel, 2003).

Therefore, it can be concluded that the personalisation and mediatisation of politics are embedded in the broader change of the social context in which political communication

and political campaigns occur. This is relevant for this study since those tendencies inform and explain political actors' approaches and practices, which will be shown in Chapter 10.

2.3 Permanent campaigning as a structural response to the transformation of the public sphere and mediatisation of society

Political actors have been changing their approach towards political communication processes, especially regarding their electoral campaigns and dealings with the growing tendency of personalisation of politics in mass media. The key drivers of this development are the transformation of how citizens and politicians communicate and the increasing trend towards further mediatisation of society and politics (see, e.g., Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014, Wagner, 2005, Strohmeier, 2004, 2002). Blumenthal (1980) recognises the growing relevance of image management and maintaining good media relationships for politicians at a very early stage and condenses these ideas under the concept of *permanent campaigning*. He made, in particular, reference to suggestions by Caddel (1976). Caddel was an advisor to the then President-elect Jimmy Carter and suggested adopting a long-term campaigning and media strategy to improve his positioning for the next presidential election. Blumenthal (1980) concludes that there has been a significant shift in how political communication and campaigning are conducted: to maximise the chance for (re-)election, political actors utilised extended campaigning periods. He argues that the public and mass media must always be considered in political actors' activities to establish a favourable image to consolidate electoral success. Consequently, the institutional role of elected representatives would merge with their role as political campaigners and become indistinguishable. Those running for office would become more important than the parties who nominate them⁶; their campaigning efforts would be much more professional and managed by campaigning professionals, e.g. spin doctors (see Ornstein and Mann, 2000). Although this concept has been updated, applied and expanded (e.g., debate on funding efforts by

⁶ There are several typical cases: a very recent one which mirrors this phenomenon is the electoral campaign of Donald Trump for the US presidential election in 2016 but also Barack Obama's campaigns show very similar characteristics (see, e.g., Lobo, 2017, Maddalena, 2016, Gerodimos and Justinussen, 2015). The electoral campaigns of LaREM in the presidential and legislative elections in 2017 in France have also shown a high degree of personalization (see Evans and Ivaldi, 2017). The electoral campaigns of CDU/CSU in the recent general elections in Germany (see, e.g., Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014), the electoral campaigns of SPD for Bundestagswahl in 1998 and Labour's campaign for the general election in 1997 are other typical cases for highly personalized, modern electoral campaigns (see, e.g., Langer, 2010, Wagner, 2005, Strohmeier, 2002, Esser, 2000).

Corrado, 2000, on campaigning strategies of members of Congress by Brady and Fiorina, 2000, on campaigning efforts by Greek prime ministers by Koliastasis, 2014), it has merged with the *Modernisation thesis* on political campaigns. Comparing the literature on *permanent campaigning* with the main characteristics of the *modernisation of political campaigns*, it becomes apparent that critical features of both concepts are similar (see Ornstein and Mann, 2000, Blumenthal, 1980 and compare with, e.g., Gibson et al., 2009, Holtz-Bacha, 2006, Römmele, 2005, Wagner, 2005, Strohmeier, 2002, Holtz-Bacha, 2001). *Modernisation* and *permanent campaigning* describe critical changes in the way political communication is approached and campaigning techniques are applied.

The underlying assumption that *permanent campaigning* or *modernisation* of political communication are developments on a micro- or meso-level of the political sphere is questionable. Instead, both concepts should be understood as a structural response on a macro level. The underlying key drivers are the increasing relevance of mass media within society and the changes in how media operates, which are embedded in the broader change of society, as previously mentioned. The rising importance of professional campaigning techniques, the extension of the *purdah period*⁷, and the merger between elected representatives and officials with their (previously separated) role as campaigners are gradual, necessary and rational responses by political actors who are also driven by the aim to get re-elected. These changes are gradual since the underlying developments in the public sphere and the mediatisation process transformed how politics is communicated in degrees rather than abruptly. The adjustments are necessary since the mass media dominate those changes to the communicative link between citizens and politicians. The requirements and rules of these platforms should be considered to maintain a dialogue between politicians and the public. The changes are rational since politicians aim for re-election and should, therefore, seek appropriate techniques addressing those structural changes (see Quinn, 2012, Rallings et al., 2010, Strohmeier, 2002).

Integrating modern campaigning techniques could be considered a phenomenon on the micro- or meso-level. However, *permanent campaigning* and *modernisation* of political

⁷ The *purdah period* refers to the time “immediately before an election or referendum” in which civil servants (such as ministers) are asked to “observe discretion in announcing initiatives that are new or of a long-term character” (Johnston, 2018, p. 3).

communication should be holistically understood as a broader development, a structural response of the political sphere towards changes in the public sphere and mass media. They address a shift in how political actors approach the transformed communicative link to the public towards professional handling of communicative processes (see, e.g., Harris and Harrigan, 2015, Gibson et al., 2009, Römmele, 2005, Strohmeier, 2002).

Sharing the observation of the personalisation and professionalisation⁸ trend in British politics, as well as the growing relevance of media logic for its political actors, media management tactics and spin doctoring have received growing academic attention during the last decade (Harris and Harrigan, 2015, Baxter and Marcella, 2012, Jackson and Lilleker, 2011, Lewis et al., 2008, McNair, 2006, 2004). Quinn (2012) investigated those changes with a particular focus on New Labour and called for an assessment of new actors in the politics-media relationship: the media advisers working at the intersection of both realms (the political realm and the realm of mass media see also Figure 1). However, the debate on the impact of media advisors on political communication is unbalanced. Research on political communication provides extensive literature on crucial political actors such as (prime) ministers, presidents or frontbenchers (see, e.g., O'Brien, 2015, Karlsen and Skogerbo, 2015, Koliastasis, 2014, Balmas et al., 2014, on the situation in the UK see, e.g., Fisher, 2017, Franklin, 2016, Heppell, 2013, Quinn, 2012, Lewis et al., 2008, Schlesinger, 2006, Cottle, 2003, Schlesinger et al., 2001). Still, much less is known about second-order politicians (e.g., backbenchers and regional politicians). Furthermore, research on political campaigning is often focussed on the strategies of media advisers and their role in the run-up to elections. In contrast, the role of spin doctors and communication practitioners and their day-to-day activities during routine periods is largely ignored. This is particularly striking, considering the debate on permanent campaigning, which highlights the relevance of widening the scope of research on campaigning and communication efforts of politicians outside the purdah period.

⁸ Professionalisation in the context of this thesis is primarily discussed with reference to political communication and media professionalisation. There is a substantial body of literature discussing it from various angles, especially the professionalisation of politicians (see, e.g., Paneque 2023, Fawcett and Corbett, 2018, Allen, 2018, Allen and Cairney, 2017, Barber, 2014, Cairney, 2007).

3 Media Management in Politics: The rise of the spin doctoring

The previous chapter focused on the changing nature of politics in the context of an increasingly mediated public sphere. It has provided insight into the new 'playing field' in which media and political actors operate. This chapter focuses on political elites' responses to changes in political communication and campaigning to provide insight into the dynamics between politics and media from the perspective of political actors. Particular attention is given to the literature on 'spin doctoring' since these techniques will likely be relevant to parliamentary assistants with media-related tasks. After that, academic research on mass media's (political) power is reviewed to understand how media may shape political communication. The argument is extended by devoting attention to spin doctoring techniques as strategic responses of political elites to a highly-mediatised world. This perspective helps contextualise media management as part of the work of parliamentary assistants.

3.1 The interplay between media and political actors

One of the critical characteristics Blumenthal (1980) identified in *The Permanent Campaign* was the rise of media consultants and communication professionals, also called spin doctors. The increasing importance of this type of consultant has been a fairly consensual position in the scholarly debate (see, e.g., Fisher, 2017, McKnight, 2016, 2015, Serazio, 2014, Schmitz and Karam, 2013, Ornstein and Mann, 2000), leading to further attempts to conceptualise and capture this development. Zaller (2017), for example, developed the concept of media politics by referring to the increasingly important trend of political decision-makers to consider media and their reactions to their political action.

Going back to the discussion on the transformation of the public sphere, it is hardly surprising that mass media plays a crucial role for political actors, given its communicative importance in the public sphere in general. Graber and Dunaway (2017) emphasise that to get into power and retain it, politicians need to consider the underlying rules governing the behaviour of media actors. Beyond this, political candidates need to use emerging opportunities to present themselves in mass media, at the very least since it gives them a chance to reach a large number of voters (see, e.g., Garland, 2017, Sanders et al., 2011, Strohmeier, 2002). While the changes brought by social media provided candidates with an alternative for reaching a wider audience, mass media

remains vital for citizens who seek to stay informed (Newton, 2021). Beyond this, social media also incentivises the inclusion of communication professionals to optimise political messaging, which is why permanent campaigning has been expanded to social media networks (Elmer et al., 2012, but also Sampugnaro and Montemagno, 2021).

To summarise, scholars agree that political actors increasingly rely on professional support in their political communication efforts. With this, they aim to maximise the reach of their messaging, increase the chance of positive coverage and attempt to exert control over the narratives and content conveyed about them and their positions in media outlets and on media platforms (Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2016, Quinn, 2012, Wolfsfeld, 2022, Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999). This process of professionalising political communication is rooted in the aforementioned structural changes affecting public communication (see, e.g., Tenscher et al., 2016, Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014, Esser, 2013, Quinn, 2012), and it is also understood as self-reinforcing. Not using professional means of communication might not just be ineffective and inefficient for political messaging and strategic communication; it also puts those who do not utilise these methods at a relative disadvantage compared to competitors who are taking advantage of them.

The emergence of increasingly professionalised political communication and campaigning has been identified as a common trend among Western democracies (see, e.g., Campus, 2020b, Karlsen and Saglie, 2017, Tenscher et al., 2016, Strohmeier, 2002). Consequently, it has also been found in the UK. Research confirmed it follows the same trends as in other European countries or the USA: Political actors increasingly employ communication professionals to influence media actors and their news reporting (see, e.g., Garland, 2017, Lewis et al., 2008, White and Hobsbawm, 2007, Davis, 2002, Schlesinger et al., 2001).

One of the critical debates on conceptualising and assessing this influence focuses on the agenda-setting power of media and politics (see, e.g., Barberá et al., 2019, Crow and Lawlor, 2016, Tresch et al., 2013, Wolfe et al., 2013, Thesen, 2013, Hänggli and Kriesi, 2010, Walgrave and Van Aelst, 2006). Agenda-setting power can be defined as the ability to influence the salience of an issue or a topic compared to other relevant media or political actors. There has been substantial research on the perceived influence of media among political decision-makers. The findings are notable since they indicate that political actors presume that media has a significant agenda setting-power (see, e.g.,

Lengauer et al., 2014, Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2011). When comparing this view with the ongoing debate on how much power media has over politics and vice versa, it is apparent that media power is differently assessed by political actors, who act upon their perceptions. Consequently, political actors' perception of media power also needs to be considered in the discussions on mediatised politics and professionalised political communication.

Vesa et al. (2015) address the perceived perception by parliamentarians of media power but differentiate between media's impact on symbolic and substantive agendas. Substantive agendas include policy-making processes. According to interviewed MPs, those processes often take place outside the view of the public and media representatives and would be far less affected. When considering the consequences of the perceived power of media, this finding indicates that the potentially disproportional appreciation of media power is limited to particular areas of political decision-making and affects some more than others. Interestingly, the results of the study by Elmelund-Præstekær et al. (2011) on the unequal impact of mediatisation on political actors somewhat mirror those findings. Because some politicians are considered more newsworthy than others, they receive more attention and, consequently, have more opportunities to voice their views and influence media reporting. The relevance of the perception of media power and the differing newsworthiness of parliamentarians highlights that a holistic, comprehensive understanding of political communication also requires research on a micro level – individual actors, such as parliamentarians and their staff members who communicate on their behalf.

Political communication scholars have also paid attention to the political process and the interaction of political and media actors. Wolfsfeld's (2022) Politics-Media-Politics (PMP) cycle, for example, sees politicians as initiators of events covered by the media, and the media's coverage or reaction to those events triggers further events or reactions by politicians. Sellers (2010) conceptualises the interplay between politics and media similarly with his proposed "cycle of spin". Political actors initiate the cycle by attempting to optimise the reach and the impact of their messaging through mass media. The political actor will need to create an adequate message (first stage) and promote it accordingly (second stage). Mass media's engagement and subsequent coverage of the messaging (third stage) would cause a reaction to the messaging by political actors in their communication and policy processes (fourth and final stage). Crucially, both

conceptualisations of the process by Sellers (2010) and Wolfsfeld (2022) consider feedback links, emphasising that the relationship between politics and media is not one-sided but a dynamic interaction. With this in mind, it is essential to acknowledge that political actors play a substantial role in the shaping of media reporting (and vice versa) as those models illustrate (see also Entman, 2003 for his cascading model conceptualising the relationship between politics and media) and a growing body of research confirms. Consequently, employed media strategies and approaches of engagement on an individual level need to be considered if the relationship between political actors and media is to be comprehensively understood. In the context of this thesis, investigating the relationship between media stakeholders and parliamentarians requires addressing the critical role of parliamentary assistants as mediators and political communicators. However, Chapter 4 will show that their practices and approaches have rarely been investigated.

3.2 Response Strategies of Political Elites: Spin doctoring

The debate on spin doctors has been part of broader scholarly discussions on the professionalisation of political communication (Fisher, 2017). The practices of spin doctors have been extensively researched, for example, in the USA (see, e.g., Martin and Peskowitz, 2018, Nyhan and Montgomery, 2015, Ornstein and Mann, 2000), the UK (see, e.g., Gaber, 2016, 2000, McNair, 2004, Schlesinger et al., 2001) and Australia (see, e.g., Fisher, 2017, 2014, McKnight, 2016, 2015, Phillipps, 2003). The term often remains undefined but is usually used to refer to spin doctors as advisors or consultants responsible for political communication and handling relations with media representatives. Spin doctors often have a professional background in PR or journalism. They are employed to secure favourable news coverage and generally support the political communication efforts of their client (see, e.g., Joathan and Lilleker, 2023, McKnight, 2016, 2015, Fisher, 2014). Those efforts are usually "behind the scenes". They involve different aspects of crisis communication management, responding to critique and opposing arguments, perception and information management, managing and staging media events, and providing or denying access to relevant political actors or information. The overarching aim is usually the promotion of a defined set of policies or a policy or contributing to the electoral success of their client (e.g., political parties or individual candidates).

Spin doctors are expected to utilise their skills and experiences to work in favour of their client's political interests within the boundaries of their contractual commitments (see, e.g., Fisher, 2017, 2014, Hobbs, 2016, Schmitz and Karam, 2013, Quinn, 2012, Esser et al., 2000). Because they are employed as communication practitioners and media consultants by political parties or individual politicians, they are only accountable to them (see Figure 3).

The growing importance of spin doctors is due to their familiarity with the media environment, journalist practices and operations. This includes an understanding of media logic. Because of this, they are expected to be able to anticipate and influence media representatives to exert control over the news reporting and agenda.⁹ With this, they aim to influence the media consumers in their client's favour by shaping the content provided to them by journalists and editors (see, e.g., Sampugnaro and Montemagno, 2021, Garland, 2017, McKnight, 2015, Esser and Spanier, 2005, Esser et al., 2000). Their role also includes strategic and tactical elements aimed at supporting a favourable positioning of their clients and a negative positioning for their political opponents (Louw, 2010).

However, it is unclear to what extent spin doctors can influence public opinion through their actions (see, e.g., Gaber, 2016, McKnight, 2016, Strong, 2012, Esser et al., 2000). The lack of consensus over the actual impact of spin doctors on public opinion is unsurprising, given that the related debate on the extent of media's influence over politics and public opinion (and vice versa) also remains open (see, e.g., Barberá et al., 2019, Kosho, 2016, Habel, 2012, Louw, 2010, Brandenburg, 2002). Irrespective of their capacity to meet those expectations, spin doctors emerged due to the mediatisation and professionalisation of politics. Their role needs to be understood as a result of broader structural changes, which have been discussed in previous sections (see, e.g., Garland, 2017, Hobbs, 2016, Schmitz and Karam, 2013, Francia and Herrnson, 2007, Andrews, 2006, Ornstein and Mann, 2000, Friedenberg, 1997).

⁹ Some media advisors have been working as journalist and know therefore their working routines and their operational logic (see, e.g., Fisher, 2017).

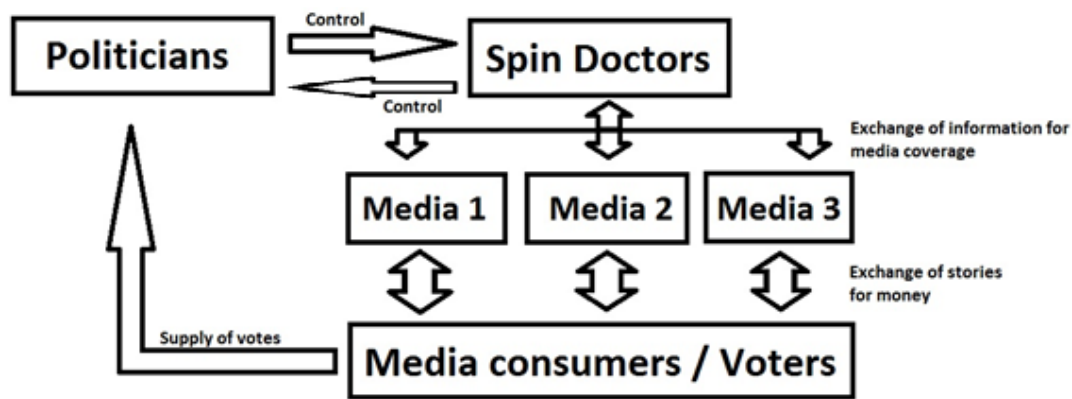


Figure 3 The spin doctor's role in political communication Quinn (2012, p. 278) with adjustments by the author. In the original model, control is by the politician over spin doctors. However, spin doctors can also acquire significant power and influence over politicians (Heffernan and Webb, 2005, McNair, 2004).

The spin doctor was initially a neutral term, referring to professionals who can "spin" political messages favourably in an electoral context. However, it is now largely negatively connotated and associated with ethically questionable communication practices, such as manipulating, distorting and deceiving political messaging (Andrews, 2006). In that context, it is unsurprising that the emergence of spin doctors in political communication was accompanied by the notion of public communication undergoing a substantial crisis (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995, but also Gaber, 2016 for the re-evaluation of the crisis thesis in the context of the rise of digital media and social media). The negativity surrounding the term has been assigned to journalists who aimed to undermine and delegitimise the interests of politicians pursued by utilising their media advisors (Esser et al., 2000). This critique of journalists' commentary about spin doctors mirrors the critique of oversimplified, trivialised and negatively framed news coverage associated with mass media's commercialisation in conjunction with society's mediatisation.

One of the consequences of the growing negative connotation of the term spin doctor is that the term itself has been changed by those who fulfil those roles. Édes (2000) and Phillipps (2003) listed alternative job titles which are usually in use, such as press officer, press secretary, spokesperson, press attache or communication officer. Stanton (2007) re-emphasises this by noting that *spin doctor* is synonymously used for PR practitioners. Yong and Hazell (2014) conclude that in the UK, job title alternatives to spin doctors, such as *media advisers* or *special advisers*, are often used for public relations professionals hired to manage the media relationships of their (political)

employers (e.g., the government or political parties). The myriad of alternative job titles further complicates finding a precise definition. However, certain features associated with the activities those advisors are trusted with remain unchanged:

1. The role features a relatively high degree of complexity and involves managing relationships with media representatives. It can also entail developing media and campaign strategies, such as segmenting the voter market and defining target groups.¹⁰
2. The role remains under intense scrutiny and normatively contested.

Similar to Habermas's (1962) argument on the rise of the marketing industry in the 1940s and 1950s, *spin doctors* are suspected of undermining democratic norms by undermining established 'gatekeepers' of public discourse to influence public opinion. Other contemporary publications shared Habermas's critique (see, e.g., Packard, 1957).

Considerable attention has been paid to spin doctors' practices and techniques, particularly those employed by governments (see, e.g., Garland, 2017, Tenscher et al., 2016, Wagner, 2005, Craig, 2004, Brown, 2003a, 2003b). One way of categorising spin doctor's activities has been offered by Gaber (2000) by distinguishing between overt activities, such as traditional press work, and covert activities, such as reinforcing messaging discipline and attempts to influence and shape the news agenda. The aforementioned journalistic or media background of a significant proportion of media relation practitioners (see, e.g., Fisher, 2017, 2014, Palm and Sandström, 2014, Craig, 2004, Phillipps, 2003) provides them with an inside perspective of their journalist counterparts. It makes it easier for them to anticipate their needs and structural or workplace pressures. Consequently, it is easier for those media advisors to understand which stories, images or frames are well-received by media representatives (Louw, 2010). Research (see, e.g., Tenscher et al., 2016, Ornstein and Mann, 2000, Esser et al., 2000) conducted around electoral campaigns also noted that the responsibilities of "spin doctors" do not always involve direct engagement with media stakeholders (e.g., monitoring activities, organising media events, arranging interviews, press conferences etc.). Involvement in activities which aim to support campaigning efforts without directly engaging with media counterparts, such as polling or developing electoral

¹⁰ The different facets of this work are well illustrated by Blumenthal's *The Permanent Campaign*, when he focuses on advisors and consultants such as Patrick Caddell (see Blumenthal, 1980 but also Caddell, 1976 and Bowman, 2000).

strategies, is not unusual. However, the result of these activities might feed into media-related efforts (e.g., utilising polling and focus group results to adjust the communication output).

It is unclear how social media's emergence affects spin doctors' work. Traditional media find themselves in a position where their gatekeeper function for disseminating information to the public is challenged. Initially, spin doctors utilised their relations with traditional mass media for their communication-related activities. However, considering the changes in the communicative set-up of the public sphere, this could be questioned as outdated. Scholars have already engaged with the democratic potential of social media (see, e.g., Bode, 2016, Harris and Harrigan, 2015, Xenos et al., 2014, Leadbeater, 2010). For example, Leston-Bandeira and Bender (2013) investigated the use of social media by parliaments and the extent to which it encourages public engagement. Closely related to this is the emergence of parliamentary storytelling, a tool conceived to increase public engagement with the parliament by producing engaging video stories featuring the parliament (see above Prior and Leston-Bandeira, 2022), which can be shared through social media. Arguably, the increasing prominence of e-petitions is also linked with the emergence of social media and has a significant dimension of public engagement (Leston-Bandeira, 2019).

The emergence of social media has also been discussed in the context of professionalised political communication and mediatisation of the different social spheres (including politics). The limitations of the challenge of mass media's content control and information gatekeeping by social media need to be considered. Newton (2021) highlights that information provided by social media is the least trusted and that users would still access either traditional mass media or their presence on social media to inform themselves. However, Gaber (2016) still argues that the democratic potential of having a more comprehensive range of alternative (digital) sources of information is weakening the previously mentioned crisis of public communication. Habermas (2022) is more critical towards recent changes caused by the emergence of digital (and social) media. He acknowledges the somewhat disruptive nature of these changes in the public sphere (*ibid.*, pp. 64-66). Among other reasons, he explains his position by outlining that because media consumers become contributors without having acquired the necessary skills and experiences of being a contributor or author, writing to a larger audience would cause problems for the quality of public debates (*ibid.*, pp. 45-47). The

tendency of users to communicate on those platforms in echo chambers of similar opinions creates a less inclusive discourse (ibid., pp. 61-63). Views are not shared and discussed among citizens with different perspectives and experiences, eventually creating a situation where the participants of these echo chamber debates (ibid., p. 45) cannot distinguish fake news from actual news (ibid., pp. 66-67). The accompanying weakening of the influence and quality of traditional media is also identified as a cause for concern by Habermas (ibid., pp. 51-53). The interplay between traditional media outlets and social media has been subject to substantial debate, and findings indicate that the agenda of traditional media still has a significant influence as a source of information. The evidence provided indicates that traditional media (and their online presence) still significantly influences social media (see, e.g., Harder et al., 2017, Siegel, 2013, Groshek and Groshek, 2013, Belair-Gagnon, 2012, Newman, 2010). With this in mind, social media can be utilised to communicate with voters and influence public opinion directly, but also indirectly by influencing traditional media, whose agenda also influences the agenda on social media. It can be argued that spin doctor's traditional role was shaped in the pre-internet age and therefore undermined by the rise of digital media; the emergence of social media opens up further opportunities to them while the traditional media, and with this spin doctor's initial function, is still of significant relevance.

Commenting on the rise of social and digital media and its consequences for spin doctors, Alastair Campbell (2014) argued that spin doctors who are not on social media would be detached from a public debate they ought to influence. Research on the use of social media by political actors acknowledged increased engagement and utilisation of those platforms for political communication (see, e.g., Sampugnaro and Montemagno, 2021, Gerodimos and Justinussen, 2015, Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan, 2013). Political communication scholars have also started exploring the (mediated) communication efforts by parliamentarians on social media platforms (see, e.g., Sabag Ben-Porat et al., 2020, Larsson, 2015). In this context, it needs to be emphasised that while PAs are similar to spin doctors, there are differences in their roles' scope, background and responsibilities. Consequently, political communication and management of media relations or social media accounts by spin doctors are to be distinguished from the approaches and practices of PAs, which is why the acknowledgement of the mediated character of political communication on behalf of parliamentarians by PAs is

significant. However, as shown in Chapter 4, the role of PAs has rarely been acknowledged or investigated.

Some research has also been done on the use of social media in Scotland by Scottish parliamentarians and political campaigners. Baxter and Marcella (2013) provide a systematic summary of studies conducted between 2002 and 2012 on the use of social media by parliamentary candidates and political parties in Scottish elections. He concluded that political actors increasingly use social media in their communication efforts, but usually just as one-to-many communication rather than a more interactive approach. Additionally, Baxter and Marcella (2013) highlight that there would be a disparity between social media users' and political actors' expectations regarding the format and presentation of the provided content. They also note a lack of research on political communication on social media during routine periods, which provides opportunities for future research. Additionally, it is evident from their argument that the role of mediators and aides in the communication efforts of those parliamentarians/parliamentary candidates has not been considered either.

Following up on their identified gap in the literature, Baxter et al. (2016) researched Twitter use outside the election period, focusing on parliamentarians' communication concerning community service. While noting that the timing of their research could be problematic, they confirmed the findings of previous studies, concluding that parliamentarians utilise communication one-directional rather than interactive. They identified a notable change with the increasing use of social media for communication efforts by parliamentarians, which mirrors the already outlined increasing importance of social media for public communication. However, the study was undertaken during the Scottish independence referendum campaign, which was arguably not a routine period. The campaigning context might have significantly impacted the results. Consequently, further research is needed to address the gap in social media usage by Scottish parliamentarians.

To conclude, the term spin doctor usually refers to media relations practitioners. Spin doctors typically have a professional background or intimate understanding of journalism. It can involve responsibilities and functions that might not directly involve engaging with media stakeholders but support feed into the broader communication and campaigning efforts. The literature on spin doctors or media relation practitioners is, in most cases, focused on government communications or campaigning activities by

parties. However, parliamentarians' relationships with media stakeholders and the role of their assistants in managing and influencing media coverage are usually not investigated despite being significant for the public perception of parliamentarians in their constituencies. There is also significant disproportionality in the attention paid to electoral campaigns. Routine periods are comparatively under-researched. Consequently, the next section will focus on parliamentary assistants (PAs) who support parliamentarians throughout routine periods, including their communication efforts.

4 The Parliamentary Assistants as 'everyday-life' Spin Doctors?

The previous chapters addressed the processes of mediatization and professionalisation of politics and political communication. It focused on the growing importance of spin doctors, media relations practitioners usually employed by political parties, elites and governments. The following section will put emphasis on the role of the parliamentary assistants, the main focus of this dissertation, who are employed by parliamentarians to support them in fulfilling their responsibilities as members of the parliament. Those duties include, among other tasks, communication on behalf of parliamentarians. However, it will be shown that their role and influence are under-researched and somewhat neglected in the literature. Consequently, little is known about them, leading to the notion of parliamentary assistants being "unsung heroes" (Dale, 2015, para. 1) who are barely acknowledged workers behind the scenes of the parliament (McKee, 2021).

4.1 Parliamentary Assistants, the "great unknown" behind Parliamentarians

Parliamentarians are known to delegate their work, including responsibilities related to casework in their constituencies, research concerning policies or speech writing, to their PAs. Research on their influence, practices, or role in day-to-day communications and policy-making processes is fragmented and partly outdated. Research usually focuses on parliamentarians themselves or, in the communication context, fails to acknowledge the mediated character of the communication output on their behalf (Sabag Ben-Porat et al., 2020). More attention has been paid recently to their crucial role in the parliament (McKee, 2023, Lettrari, 2020, Dickin, 2016). Very few of these studies focus on their role in the communication of parliamentarians (notably Sabag Ben-Porat and Lehman-Wilzig, 2021, Sabag Ben-Porat et al., 2020, Lev-On et al., 2017). Additionally, research is often broader and includes other types of parliamentary or legislative staff or staff members associated with political parties (see, e.g., Yong et al., 2019, Karlsen and Saglie, 2017, Neuhold and Dobbels, 2015, Egeberg et al., 2013).

While there are just a few studies on PAs, they demonstrate why this role deserves more attention in the scholarly debate on parliamentarians: PAs are involved in policy-making processes, e.g., by providing briefings and conducting research. They draft documents on behalf of the parliamentarians (e.g., writing letters to ministers or freedom of information requests) and are often the first point of contact for constituents and

journalists. Parliamentary assistants often manage the diaries, plan events, and create communication outputs on behalf of the parliamentarians.

The available literature is scattered and focuses on different parliamentary contexts, for example, the UK (McKee, 2021), Germany (Lettrari, 2020), Sweden (Karlsen and Saglie, 2017), Canada (Dickin, 2016), Israel (Sabag Ben-Porat et al., 2020, Lev-On et al., 2017), and a few comparative studies can also be found (Otjes, 2023, Sabag Ben-Porat and Lehman-Wilzig, 2021, Högenauer and Neuhold, 2015). One notable development has been the growing body of research output on the staff employed in the European Parliament (EP), for example, by Neuhold and Dobbels (2015), Egeberg et al. (2013), Dobbels and Neuhold (2013), and Winzen (2011). The increased interest in this parliamentary context is presumably due to the EP's increased legislative importance, which was established with the Lisbon Treaty entering into force in 2009. The different studies share the conclusion that parliamentary assistants are more than just filing clerks and play a significant role in the European Parliament's operations and policy-making processes.

The research undertaken by Winzen (2011) focuses on parliamentary staff working in committees. He identifies two core functions of those staff members: secretarial duties and informational support, whereby the latter substantially impacts the policy-making process. While Winzen (2011) utilised a qualitative, interview-based approach, research undertaken by Egeberg et al. (2013) was based on an online survey among EP staff members. They circulated the survey among staff members of the EP secretariat and staff of political groups within the EP. They identified that both groups covered various responsibilities, including those that directly influence and shape policy-making processes.

Egeberg et al. (2013) argued that both staff groups would be affiliated with EU-level entities, increasing their attention to the Commission and a greater appreciation of supranational concerns on Europe higher than national ones. Another point of convergence between these two groups of staff members has been identified in their focus on professional, expertise-driven conduct. Consequently, Egeberg et al. (2013) concluded that political affiliation and a technically savvy understanding of their job coexist in the role conception of staff members in political groups.

Two case studies have been undertaken by Neuhold and Dobbels (2015, 2013); in both cases, the focus has been on staff members of the General Secretariat of the EP. Dobbels and Neuhold (2013) found that staff members typically have a steering role (intervening in a policy-making process without being an active content creator) and a service role (drafting texts on request with clear limits defined by MEPs). Suppose the topic is of little salience and interest to MEPs. In that case, they can become creators in the policy-making process, especially if they can provide substantial expertise compared to parliamentarians who might not be familiar with the area. Those findings have been confirmed in their later study (Neuhold and Dobbels, 2015), highlighting that those staff members play a substantial (service and steering) role in the policy-making process, even in areas of high political salience. It is important to note that the applicability of those results on staff members in the European Parliament to other parliamentary contexts is limited due to the defining (supranational) features (see, e.g., Busby and Belkacem, 2013, Koc-Michalska and Lilleker, 2013).

However, there are some similarities in findings in other parliaments (compare Page and Jenkins, 2005, with Neuhold and Dobbels, 2015, 2013), and the variety of responsibilities and tasks are also not alien to other contexts (compare Lettrari, 2020, with Egeberg et al., 2013). Recent research on parliamentary assistants in the House of Commons by the Constitution Unit mirrors those findings (McKee, 2022a, 2022b, 2021). The growing complexity of tasks increases the need for more staff members supporting parliamentarians (McKee, 2022b). Arguably, this is similar to the case study of Dobbels and Neuhold (2013); in some cases, the lack of familiarity with specific issues and policies requires further support.

Looking at the findings from the EP, those conditions – the growing complexity of tasks and the need for help – might also open up opportunities for parliamentary assistants, especially if parliamentarians have limited interest in them and the assistant has adequate skills and expertise. Another finding is the background of assistants, who are often university-educated and of younger age (average age of 22 years for staff in non-administrative roles). The range of tasks staff members are asked to perform is also similarly diverse as in the case of the EP, which also confirms earlier research by Ryle (1981).

It has also been indicated that learning "on the job" is very common (McKee, 2021); this notion is strengthened by the findings of Romzek and Utter (1996) and Thompson

(2018). Thompson's study (ibid.) on SNP MPs in the House of Commons found that parliamentarians mostly hired generalists due to the variety of tasks staff members are expected to perform. Central staff and the Parliamentary Party Group (PPG) members also needed to undergo organisational professionalisation, indicating a learning process of adaption and familiarisation with their role.

Despite these findings, the provided insights are still minimal and somewhat fragmented. There has, so far, been even less of an attempt to investigate the role of PAs' in political communication on behalf of parliamentarians. The following section will provide an overview of the small body of literature on parliamentary assistants and their functions.

4.2 (Almost) uncharted waters: Parliamentary Assistants' role in Parliamentarians' communication

While the mediated character of parliamentarians' communication is acknowledged, and the involvement of their parliamentary assistants (PAs) in MPs' communication is known (Sabag Ben-Porat and Lehman-Wilzig, 2021, McKee, 2021, Romzek and Utter, 1996), this area has been neglected by political communication research. A notable effort to provide some insight has been undertaken by Lev-On et al. (2017), Sabag Ben-Porat et al. (2020), and Sabag Ben-Porat and Lehman-Wilzig (2021). However, their research focuses on social media, which is just one aspect of external communication by parliamentarians of the Knesset (Lev-On et al., 2017, Sabag Ben-Porat et al., 2020), which limits the transferability of their results. The comparative study on social media practices by PAs in national parliaments in Germany, the USA and Israel (Sabag Ben-Porat and Lehman-Wilzig, 2021) is, in that regard, an exception. It needs to be added that, in this case, the focus was solely on social media practices and the potential impact of the electoral system on those practices. However, their findings indicate that trust can play an essential role in delegating communication-related tasks and that the electoral system influences the direct engagement of the parliamentarian. A higher degree of familiarity with a smaller audience of the parliamentarians' social media accounts creates a higher commitment by the parliamentarian. Those findings could be indicative of a First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) context in the UK general elections and, partly, in the elections for the Scottish Parliament. Due to a smaller, constituency-based audience, parliamentarians might be more involved in managing social media accounts.

To the best of the author's knowledge, there has been no further investigation into PAs' communication strategies, tactics and practices on behalf of parliamentarians, except for Fisher (2017, 2014). However, the research conducted by her involved only those PAs who had journalist experience before they entered the role. Fisher (2017, 2014) focused in particular on the transition between the role of being a journalist to an advisor and whether they see themselves as advocates or "true believers", which limits the scope of her findings. The results of her study will be closely examined in this section.

Research on parliamentarians' communication itself is also scarce. In recent years, some efforts have been made to focus on parliamentarians' and parliamentary candidates' social media usage (see, e.g., Castanho Silva and Proksch, 2022, Haman and Školník, 2021, Vos, 2016, Baxter et al., 2016, Evans et al., 2014). However, despite the apparent gap in the literature on PA's role in the political communication of parliamentarians, an approximation is possible by shifting the focus towards the practices of appointed communication officers or spin doctors of parties and governments. In the previous section, spin doctors' roles and practices have already been discussed. Their approach is unlikely to be transferable to PAs' conduct. Unlike spin doctors, PAs are often generalists and do not have a journalist background or media experience. This is also visible in the significant differences in the salary of PAs compared to ministerial media advisors (compare with McKee, 2022b, Phillipps, 2003). Additionally, as highlighted in the previous section, the limited research on PAs' work indicates that they are involved in various tasks and not just specialised in fulfilling communication-related duties. Therefore, studying these spin doctors is valuable for understanding how media relations are managed and how political communication is handled in the mediatised political environment of the parliamentary workplace.

There has been substantial effort to study the role and the practices of media advisers in Australia (see, i.e., Fisher, 2017, 2014, Hobbs, 2016, Phillipps, 2003). While the political systems between Australia and the UK differ (see, e.g., Russell and Serban, 2021, Paun, 2011), both are typically classified as Westminster systems since they share many features (see, e.g., Gaber and Tiffen, 2018, Weller, 2018, Kerby and Banfield, 2014, Monk, 2010, but also Lijphart, 2012). As Gaber and Tiffen (2018) pointed out, one of those differences is the relevance of TV broadcasters in the UK compared to Australia, which would need to be discounted in the comparison. It also needs to be noted that the UK has different political systems in the devolved parts of the country,

namely Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland (see, e.g., Harvey, 2020, Cairney, 2011). Due to the focus of this study on Scotland, this would need to be considered when discussing media advisors. However, the Westminster system permeates and significantly impacts those sub-state systems, leading Mitchell to characterise the claim of pronounced differences between Scotland's and the UK's political system as a "narcissism of small differences" (2010). Other scholars agree that the Scottish political system has much in common with the political system of the UK (see contributions in Keating, 2020a). The political systems of the UK, Australia and Scotland have significant parallels and are pretty similar. Consequently, studying the literature on Australian media advisors will also help to understand media management and political communication approaches in the UK's professionalised and mediatised political contexts, including Scotland.

One of the most insightful works has been provided by Phillipps (2003), who offers a comprehensive, interview-based study on ministerial media advisors in Australia. He described those advisors as comparatively young, well-educated, and with experience working for media outlets, which would give them a unique understanding of media logic and newsworthiness. Those insights are prerequisites for managing media relations; core tasks such as planning media events, providing exclusives, press releases, briefings, networking, organising interviews, providing training to employers, photo-ops and conducting crisis management would be challenging to complete adequately without them. Phillipps (2003) described in his study a high-stress, fast-paced environment, which forces them to be more reactive than proactive; the media environment in which they operate has also been criticised as overly negative and simplistic in their reporting. The difficulties around work-life balance, the intrusion of their jobs into their private lives and the workload are identified as key drivers behind relatively high staff turnover and the short tenure length (approximately 1-2 years) of ministerial media advisors. Consequently, advisors often leave their jobs before becoming experts in the tasks they are asked to perform.

Interestingly, interviewees described a unique political environment, the chance to shape politics and the competitive salary as clear advantages that outweigh those issues. However, eventually, most advisors transition to jobs in PR or journalism, or they use their position as an opportunity to start a political career. Changing jobs is easier because of the similarities of their job profile as media advisors compared to PR practitioners

outside of politics. Phillipps (2003) noted that normative consideration would be important for media advisors; they would reject the negatively connotated term of spin doctors and claim to avoid deliberately lying. Response strategies towards crises, e.g., trying to undermine bad stories or using good stories to overshadow bad ones, are not identified as ethically problematic. At times, interviewees described themselves as the conscience of their ministers. One of the key findings, reflecting on the normative implications of advisors' understanding of their role and activities, is that Phillipps (2003) argues in favour of an enforceable code of conduct.

Fisher (2014) echoes Phillipps's findings (2003) in various ways. In her study on parliamentary media advisors (PAs designated as communication officers), she highlighted that it is critical for these advisors to understand "media logic". Some networking activities described by Phillipps (2003) also mirror Fisher's acknowledgement of the relevance of trust in the tense relations between media advisors and media representatives. Similar to Phillipps's findings (2003), interviewees did not see their work as unethical; they explained that their work was grounded in their morals and that they would avoid deliberately lying to their journalist counterparts. In a later study, she expands on this point, highlighting that while advisors are rarely "true believers" of their employers, they understand themselves as advocates and often share (at least parts of) their values. However, similar to Phillipps (2003), she emphasises that omissions are used to avoid lying, which is arguably problematic and strengthens the argument for an enforceable code of conduct. Fisher (2014) sees a need for clear transition guidelines for advisors entering and leaving their roles to avoid a conflict of interest. She also found that the transition experience of different advisors varies, which indicates that entering or leaving the role is very distinct and dependent on the particular context.

Another interesting result is the learning process parliamentary advisors undergo, which echoes the findings of Phillipps (2003) and mirrors the results of the aforementioned studies involving PAs (McKee, 2021, Thompson, 2018, Romzek and Utter, 1996). Later studies by Hobbs (2016) and McKnight (2016, 2015) reiterated some of the findings on the ethical self-understanding of the role of an advisor, the tasks they are entrusted with and the reactive character of their activities. Additionally, McKnight (2016) provided insight into spin doctoring's limitations in his study on the Rudd government. He emphasised that a media-cycle-driven approach based on a permanent campaign,

characterised by merging campaigning and governing, would impede the development of a clear and successful strategy. It would eventually also create a conflict with journalist counterparts who would see this approach as difficult to reconcile with their professional ethics. Besides, when spinning tactics are identified as an attempt to "spin", they would also be damaging for the one who utilises them.

The role of media advisors or spin doctors in the UK has also been subject to considerable debate, especially considering the work done on the communication and approaches towards media of New Labour and the time of the Premiership of Tony Blair (see, e.g., Taylor, 2012, Heffernan, 2006, Langer, 2006, Esser et al., 2000). The scholarly debates were connected to broader discussions on changes in British politics during that time, for example, the presidentialisation of the prime ministerial role (see, e.g., Diamond, 2019, Poguntke and Webb, 2013, Heffernan and Webb, 2005, McNair, 2004) or structural reforms, such as introducing devolution (see, e.g., Harvey, 2020, Powell, 2016). The introduction of devolution sparked further debates on the developments in the devolved regions, also considering the media landscape and public communication (see, e.g., Schlesinger, 2020, Blain and Hutchison, 2016, Hassan, 2016, Rosie and Petersoo, 2009, Schlesinger et al., 2001).

The literature on spin doctoring and political communication practices in Britain mirrors the findings of the research undertaken in Australia. Gaber (2000) identifies a range of techniques and methods by media advisors, such as reacting fast to emerging issues in the news, centralised communication, or issuing prepared rebuttals, which have been prepared in anticipation of attacks by political opponents. The centralisation of communication efforts, also addressed by Franklin (2004a) and McNair (2004), has been put in place to have more control over the information flow and to improve the coordination of political messaging among crucial political actors (see also Garland, 2017, 2016).

The limitation of spin was explored by Esser et al. (2000) and Stanyer (2003). For one, unified messaging requires control over the tensions between the different factions within the parties. Consequently, the absence of control or overt tensions might make aligning communication efforts impossible (see Esser et al., 2000 on the campaigning efforts by the Conservative and Unionist Party in 1997). Second, the attempt to control the communication flow towards journalists by selectively providing or denying access to information and political actors and undermining journalists by attacking them

directly or indirectly through critical stakeholders (e.g., editors-in-chief) within the media outlet created tensions and conflicts (Franklin, 2004a, Stanyer, 2003, Esser et al., 2000). The latter arguably replicates the observed developments in Australia by McKnight (2016), who discussed the Rudd government's difficulties in their communication efforts and media relations.

Another parallel was the matter of ethical conduct. While media advisors rejected the notion of lying, the encountered practices of, e.g., releasing information which is less favourable at a point of time they get the least coverage (Gaber, 2000), are at least questionable since it seeks favourable intransparency. However, Esser et al. (2000) argue that spin doctors primarily act as advocates seeking to offer the most favourable interpretation of political reality, which does not necessitate lying (see also Garland, 2018 on the difference between spin doctoring and "post truth"). Generally, the tendency to integrate media logic into political decision-making and implementation of policies, as well as professionalised communication efforts, has been identified as a critical characteristic which keeps on being relevant (see, e.g., Diamond, 2019, Garland, 2016, Gewirtz et al., 2004, McNair, 2004).

The insights provided in this section show the increasing importance of professional communication efforts. However, parliamentary assistants have largely been ignored in the literature. It can only be assumed that the professionalisation and mediatisation of politics will also affect their communication practices. The study conducted by Fisher (2014) on parliamentary media advisers provides a first glimpse of the impact of these developments on PA's communication efforts. Nevertheless, further research and a shift of focus towards parliamentary assistants are needed to understand how professionalisation and mediatisation affect parliamentarians' political communication. Considering the last sections, exploring their mediation and spinning roles is particularly important. This entails understanding their contributions in creating communication output and controlling information flow, developing communication and media strategies, and approaching network-building and maintaining activities with media actors.

So far, it remains unclear to what extent professionalisation and mediatisation are reflected in the daily work of parliamentarians. Due to the limited access to resources, it seems unlikely they can hire media advisors to professionalise and improve their political communication routines or campaigning management. However, research

undertaken on parliamentary assistants has highlighted that those assistants play a crucial role in the political operations of parliamentarians. It can be assumed that they significantly impact the daily routines of political communication processes and political campaigns of parliamentarians. Although further research on that matter seems obvious, there has been no attempt to evaluate this assumption critically. The hypothesis on the significant role of parliamentary assistants in political communication processes has yet to be confirmed.

5 Campaigning and Political Communication in Scotland

The previous chapters discussed the trend towards further mediatisation of political processes and professionalising of political communication. It has also shown that those developments provided incentives to employ professional campaigners and communicators to maximise electoral success. Those trends increasingly question the differentiation between the times in and outside the *purdah* period; permanent campaigning – through the ongoing pursuit to influence media actors – becomes more and more critical to provide the groundwork for future electoral success (see Ornstein and Mann, 2000, but also Vos, 2016). Very few studies have been undertaken on parliamentary assistants working for individual parliamentarians to investigate their influence on political decisions, even less on their influence on political campaigns or communication processes on behalf of these parliamentarians.

Shifting the focus specifically to the Scottish case that is the object of this thesis, it will be shown that Scotland's current campaigning and political communication trends are similar to developments in other Western democracies. In the following sections, the political system of Scotland and its electoral system are discussed to illustrate the political and structural context of political communication by Scottish parliamentarians.

5.1 The political system and political campaigning in Scotland since 1999

Schlesinger et al. (2001) pointed out that issues and agendas arose with the devolution of power, indicating that the UK should not be understood as a single, unitary political and communicative space. However, the following discussion will demonstrate similar trends of increasingly professionalised and personalised political communication in Scotland compared to the rest of the United Kingdom or, more generally, other European democracies (see, e.g., Higgins and McKay, 2016, Downs, 2012). However, there has been a substantial scholarly debate about the Scottish political system and to what extent it retained elements of the Westminster system. This debate is significant, considering there has been an attempt to do politics differently ("new politics") since devolution was introduced (see, e.g., Cairney, 2020, Denny, 2020, Parker and Richter, 2018, Mitchell, 2010, Shephard et al., 2001).

"New politics" aimed to promote a more collaborative style of politics (Mitchell, 2000). The introduction of the Mixed-Member Proportional system (MMP) for the Scottish

Parliament elections, rather than adopting the UK-wide FPTP system, needs to be understood in that context. It was part of the attempt to establish a more consensual-oriented political system as a counterpart to adversary politics and the Westminster Modell (see, e.g., Parker et al., 2020, Bradbury, 2009, Carman and Shephard, 2007, Schlesinger et al., 2001). However, its success was limited since the MMP systems might promote further collaboration but cannot force its actors to do so (Lundberg, 2013, and also Mitchell, 2010, arguing there is very little difference between Westminster politics and politics in Scotland). Further research also examined the legislative powers and policy-making (see, e.g., Cairney, 2020, Denny, 2020, Duclos, 2008) and the party system and elections in Scotland (see, e.g., Clark, 2020, Mitchell and Henderson, 2020a, Anderson, 2016). Another area that has enjoyed increasing academic interest over the last few years is the debate on Scottish independence and the 2014 independence referendum (see, e.g., Brie and Dufresne, 2020, Keating, 2020b, Shephard and Quinlan, 2015). The growing body of academic literature on Scottish politics demonstrates that studying politics in Scotland needs to be done by considering the Scottish context and distinct inner-Scottish dynamics rather than a sub-ordinated element of the UK's political system. However, research on political communication in Scotland has been somewhat limited.

So far, studies have shown similar modernisation and professionalisation trends in political communication as in the rest of the UK (see, e.g., Tarrega, 2017, Baxter et al., 2016, Downs, 2012). Higgins and McKay (2016) also confirmed this trend. They concluded that mediatisation significantly influences the image building and the public persona of Nicola Sturgeon (the party leader of the SNP at the time) portrayed in the Scottish press. Further studies have been undertaken by Baxter and Marcella (2012, 2011), focusing in particular on the use of Facebook and Twitter by Scottish politicians for their campaigns in the UK general election in 2010. They found that while the different political actors were integrating social media platforms in their communication efforts with voters, candidates and parties primarily used it one-way to broadcast messages rather than interactively. This finding was confirmed by Baxter et al. (2016) a few years later in their study on Scottish parliamentarians' use of Twitter. Overall, the same trends of professionalised political communication, mediatisation of politics and usage of social media platforms identified in Western democracies can also be found in Scotland.

Taking the identified trends of political communication in Scotland into consideration, it is essential to understand how political communication is undertaken on behalf of Scottish parliamentarians. It is a matter of debate on how representative democracy will develop, considering the aforementioned trends (Alonso et al., 2011). Some scholars argue that the emergence of digital and social media would be an opportunity to strengthen the relationship between citizens and elected politicians. In the Scottish context, this has often been discussed in the context of the debate on the independence referendum in 2014 (Shephard and Quinlan, 2015, Andre et al., 2014, Midtbø et al., 2014, Enli and Skogerbø, 2013). One of the crystallisation points of this debate is on how developments of professionalization, mediatisation, and the rise of social media affect the future of democracy and whether public communication is in a state of crisis (see, e.g., Gottfried et al., 2017, Gaber, 2016).

One important focal point of this debate was the degree of personalisation of politics. The increasing emphasis on personal characteristics and actions, differentiating politicians from their party and becoming important as individuals, points towards changing patterns of political representation. Those trends might incentivise individual parliamentarians to adapt their communication, shifting away from their party to a more personalised way of communication. Depauw et al. (2014) emphasised the growing importance of distinguishing individual politicians from their party. Consequently, it might become increasingly important for parliamentarians in Scotland to seek a more personalised way of communicating with their prospective voters. In addition, there is a well-established link in the literature between the electoral system and the type of vote-seeking behaviour displayed by parliamentarians' campaigning and political communication. This literature will be reviewed in the following section to explore how parliamentarians may vary in their communication approaches.

5.2 MMP and political campaigning in Scotland

The previous section demonstrated that broader trends in the mediatisation of politics and professionalisation of political communication could also be found in Scotland. However, recent discussions have indicated that the setup of the electoral system itself can partly drive those developments. The Scottish electoral system, an MMP system, provides a relatively rare case yet to be studied regarding its implications for the political communication practices of individual parliamentarians.

A growing body of literature has analysed the electoral system according to its implication for candidacy campaigns. They tend to agree that the different electoral formulas offer incentives inherent to their particular systems (see, e.g., Bergman et al., 2013, Nemoto and Shugart, 2013, Pachón and Shugart, 2010, Crisp et al., 2007). Based on the assumption that candidates follow office-seeking motives, they argue that successful electoral campaigns by candidates differ in proportional voting systems compared to majoritarian systems. Majoritarian systems would give incentives for personalising the campaign "to cultivate a personal vote". Proportional voting systems, on the other hand, would reward the cultivation of "a party vote" through the electoral campaign (Carey and Shugart, 1995, but also Pachón and Shugart, 2010). However, those studies primarily rely on quantitative evidence rather than qualitative depth. The implications of electoral systems on individual parliamentarians' communication practices and strategical decision-making remain largely unexplored. The literature also tends to neglect ambivalent cases of MMP systems. MMP systems entail elements of proportional and majoritarian voting systems. The ratio between seat allocation through the proportional and majoritarian votes and the mechanism to balance both elements can differ (Nohlen, 2000).

The compensation mechanism (see, e.g., Fehndrich, 2013, Lundberg, 2007, Grotz, 2000) significantly complicates the application of the model proposed by Carey and Shugart (1995) on whether a party vote or a personal vote is to be cultivated. The incentives that are provided depend on the circumstances and institutional set-up of the MMP election. There has been a considerable number of case studies on MMP systems and applications of the model by Carey and Shugart (1995) on various electoral systems. Still, the influence of MMP systems on the political communication practices of parliamentary candidates is largely under-researched; for example, it is unclear how the pursuit of constituency seats compared to party list candidates impacts their communication. However, few studies focus on related aspects that are worth mentioning since they indicate that parliamentarians' political communication process is heavily influenced by the electoral system in which they are embedded.

For example, Andre et al. (2014) pointed out that parliamentarians in open-list systems would be more likely to be engaged at the constituency level than their peers in closed-list systems. They argue that incumbents have a clear incentive to be more locally active and to be seen if the electoral system provides voters with the opportunity to indicate a

preference for individual candidates when they cast their votes. However, contextual factors such as district magnitude and ballot structure need to be considered. Other factors, such as party size and personal preferences towards activities of constituency representation, have been identified as significant.

Andre et al. (2014) also noted that regional parliamentarians are more inclined to be active in a constituency than national parliamentarians. They conclude that while the context and preferences of the parliamentarian are essential factors, the open-list system provides clear incentives for a constituency orientation of incumbents seeking to be re-elected. Similar findings were presented by Bräuninger et al. (2012), who identified electoral incentives for fostering personal votes among parliamentarians in a flexible list system. Ariga (2020) confirmed that conclusion. In his comparative electoral study on eleven democracies, he found that the incentive for seeking personal votes amplifies in systems which allow voters to designate their vote to a particular candidate (e.g., by influencing the candidate's position on the party lists). Consequently, the more agency voters have in choosing a particular candidate, the more inclined candidates will be to seek a personal vote. This finding is relevant for Scotland since most seats in the elections for the Scottish Parliament are distributed through FPTP while the rest are allocated through regional closed lists. However, a compensation system is in place, which deducts every seat of a party won in the constituency vote from the seats the party would have won through the list vote and allocates this seat to the other parties. No additional measures will be applied if a party gains more constituency mandates than mandates by party votes (Fehndrich, 2013). Scotland's multiparty system (Lundberg, 2013) and the dominance of constituency seats in the Scottish parliament increases in Scottish elections the likelihood that some parties get through their success in constituency votes more seats than they are supposed to get according to list votes (Grotz, 2000).

The MSP's representational behaviour, including their approach to media, is shaped by the tense relationship between politicians and journalists, such as parties and politicians. Evidence suggests that the more MSPs get into the news, the more votes they get (van Aelst et al., 2008). Similarly, Cook (2005) and Sellers (2010) observe that making the news is instrumental to policy-making, as it is a way for MSPs to get the issues they care about on the agenda, to build reputation, and to persuade others to support their point of view. As Midtbø et al. (2014) put it, they respond to media issues and follow

highly mediatised issues to demonstrate that they care, are on top of things and are connected to the public (see also Wolfsfeld and Sheafer, 2006). However, Midtbø et al. (2014) also state that the relationship's closeness depends on several factors, e.g. whether the parliamentarian is a generalist or specialist, experienced in dealing with media or has a high seniority or status. Going back to the discussion above on whether parliamentarians seek personal votes, the parliamentarian's media management approach might also depend on their mandate type. While there is substantial literature on the interaction between parliamentarians and media (e.g. Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2016, Maurer, 2011), this rarely extends to the communication and media management practices on their behalf (see, e.g., Fisher, 2014) in the context of specific electoral systems. It is, therefore, aimed to explore the influence of this type of electoral system on the communication practices and decision-making processes of individual parliamentarians.

To conclude, Scotland's MMP system is a comparatively typical case for this class of electoral systems; it is similar to New Zealand's or Germany's (until 2013) electoral systems (see Fehndrich, 2013, Lundberg, 2013, 2007). It shares New Zealand's adversarial heritage and its struggle to establish a more consensus-oriented political approach (see Lundberg, 2013). Collaboration with competitors during electoral campaigns, as it is known from German elections (Fehndrich, 2013), is uneasy, although a coordinated approach to maximise constituency votes and list votes could help involved parties to increase their number of seats. Current trends in political communication that are known from other political contexts can also be identified in Scotland. At the same time, the Scottish case underwent a unique political development through its attempt to distance itself from adversarial Westminster politics and to pursue "new politics" after devolution had been established. Scotland offers an insightful case to evaluate the impact of its electoral system on the campaigning and communication practices of its political actors.

5.3 Concluding remarks and research focus

The last sections engaged with the scholarly debates around the uneasy relationship between media and politics. The literature review first discussed the growing tendency of political actors to integrate media logic in their decision-making processes (mediatisation), which challenged the imperative of political logic in their political

activities. After that, the focus shifted towards the engagement of political elites towards media actors, especially their perception of the relationship and their strategies to manage it. Particularly, the development of including media advisors and communication specialists in the communication efforts (professionalisation) has been discussed in greater detail. The importance of those changes has also been outlined: They are embedded in broader societal changes and a profound transformation of the media landscape. Consequently, enhancing the understanding of how parliamentarians practice political communication provides insight into elected representatives' work and the workings of increasingly mediatised Western democracies.

Scotland has been shown to offer a fruitful foundation for this research. The voting system for the elections for the Scottish Parliament allows a comparative approach to evaluate different electoral incentives (personal vote vs party vote). At the same time, Scotland has two parliaments, which provides the opportunity to compare two different types of parliamentarians (national parliament vs sub-state parliament) in a context where a new approach to politics has been tried to be established. Similar to the general neglect of parliamentary assistants in the scholarly debate, very little work has been done in the Scottish context. In contrast, a significant number of research has been undertaken to investigate the roles and activities of spin doctors and media advisors for high-profile political actors.

The reviewed literature suggests their role is decisive, particularly considering the intrusion of media logic into politics. This transformation of the political sphere towards more professionalisation and mediatisation has been almost all-encompassing. Still, there has been little effort to examine the role of parliamentarians' staff (parliamentary assistants) and how they interact with media and adjust their communication practices under those conditions. Additionally, most literature on parliamentarians' communication did not account for their mediated character. The practices during routine periods have also been far less prominent in the academic debates, at least compared to the large body of literature on communication during electoral campaign periods. Consequently, investigating the communication and media management practices of PAs from backbenchers, as opposed to high-profile parliamentarians, during routine periods has been chosen as the focus of this study.

The literature review has identified several gaps that this study intends to address. Overall, it seeks to answer two research questions:

1. What importance do parliamentary offices assign to media management and political communication outside the purdah period?
2. How is the relationship between parliamentarians and the media managed and political communication planned, designed, and executed in a parliamentary office?

Answering these questions addresses several research gaps, which were discussed in the literature review:

First, it examines the political communication of the rarely investigated 'ordinary' parliamentarians compared to the high-profile party leaders or ministers. It addresses this by evaluating the influence of the MMP system on parliamentarians' political communication and campaigning practices in routine periods. Scotland offers a typical case among other political systems which use MMP systems; the insight this case provides might also help to understand decision-making processes on political campaigns in other Additional Member Systems.

Second, it provides valuable insight into the workings of parliamentary offices, the role of parliamentary assistants in the work of parliamentarians, and the creation of communication on behalf of parliamentarians. So far, the research has neglected the role of this type of parliamentary staff. Parliamentary assistants' roles and influence in political communication on behalf of parliamentarians are unclear. Additionally, interactions among staff members and how their collaboration impacts the political communication process are equally unknown. Similarly, it is unclear to what extent other parliamentarians' offices and staff members of the PPG are involved in those political communication processes.

The literature so far addressed the involvement of media advisors on the ministerial or government level primarily; beyond a few notable exceptions, there has been little research on the communication-related work of parliamentarians' staff. Considering that the work of parliamentarians heavily relies on the contributions of supporting staff and their communication known to be mediated, the gap of knowledge is, in the context of representative democracies, particularly problematic. Parliamentarians are elected and democratically accountable to their voters; parliamentary assistants, on the other hand, potentially have a lot of power through their contributions but are selected by parliamentarians and are not accountable to anyone but them.

Third, the debate on mediatisation and professionalisation of political communication focused on already professional actors when hired as media advisors or spin doctors. They usually have substantial experience and relevant communication, public relations, marketing or media management expertise. The research on parliamentary assistants does not indicate that those staff members already have those skills when introduced into their new role. Consequently, this research will provide insight into the mediatisation and professionalisation of political communication as development on an individual level. It shifts the focus of the debate from already professional communication and media experts to initially inexperienced staff, which contributes substantially to the work of parliamentarians.

To conclude, the study aims to evaluate the PA's role in the political communication undertaken on behalf of MPs/MSPs. It will examine their interaction with the parliamentarian, other staff members, and staff members of other parliamentarians and the PPG, as well as their influence on the political communication output. In particular, the study will focus on the practices employed in media management and political communication processes and how professionalisation and mediatisation influence those. The study is dedicated to exploring the practices and roles of the "unsung heroes" of parliamentarians' political communication, who work behind the scenes and are neglected so far in the scholarly debate.

6 The Analytical Framework to Understand Communication-Related Work by Parliamentary Offices

The literature review has shown that the inside workings of parliamentary offices are, by and large, a "black box": it is unclear how they are organised or operate or which factors shape the dynamics among staff members. Consequently, political communication undertaken by these offices is unknown. Research carried out on parliamentary offices is rare, outdated or focused on the US context, which limits the transferability of findings to other political systems. Unsurprisingly, there have even been fewer studies on political communication by those offices and the role the PAs play in designing and undertaking those communication efforts. The following section will outline the theoretical framework(s), which will help to guide the analysis of the collected data.

The previous chapters outlined the importance of mediatisation and professionalisation in political communication. Both trends significantly impacted how political actors' communication has been planned, organised and executed. To answer the research questions, both theories will be used as analytical reference points guiding the overall understanding of the data.

The following sections will introduce and discuss the analytical framework, including the sub-frameworks. Professionalisation and mediatisation in political communication will be the focus of the first two sections and will provide a conceptual umbrella for the following sections. The primary aim of this part of the chapter is to explain both concepts and their defining features. It will build particularly on the works by Landerer (2013), Altheide (2016, 2013, 1979), Webb (2006, 2003), Esser (2013) and Strömbäck (2009, 2008). The interplay between mediatisation and professionalisation of political communication will also be briefly addressed since it contributed to the selection of the sub-frameworks. The following section will focus on the principal-agent theory to help understand the relationship between staff members of the parliamentary offices and the MPs and MSPs. It draws primarily from Wiencierz et al. (2021), Abbott et al. (2020), and Spake et al. (1999). The conceptualisation of interactions between PAs and parliamentarians is relevant to theories on mediatisation and professionalisation. The principal-agent theory provides insight into the rationale of MPs/MSPs when dealing with staff members:

- i. It provides a suitable framework for understanding whether and how political and media logic is applied in recruitment and controlling procedures.
- ii. It provides insight into the relevance of expertise in staff recruitment and development processes.

The third section of this chapter will introduce the conceptual framework for understanding parliamentary offices' internal organisation. This framework will be derived from conceptualising the debate around the differences between groups and teams. It draws in particular from the contributions of Katzenbach and Smith (2015), and Katzenbach and Santamaria (1999). Their research distinguishes different forms of interaction typical for either *groups* or *teams* and will help to provide a better understanding of the dynamics within parliamentary offices. Those dynamics provide the context in which professionalisation and mediatisation take place:

- i. It provides insight into the internal organisation of parliamentary offices, particularly their content creation processes for communication output and media relations management.
- ii. It helps to understand these offices' internal logic and operations and whether and to what extent they consider political logic and media logic.
- iii. Distinguishing *groups* from *teams* also provides an insightful analytical setting to examine the importance of expertise or knowledge development when assigning communication-related responsibilities.

In addition to the outlined points above, conceptualising the differences between *groups* and *teams* provides a framework to understand the interactions among parliamentary offices and between those offices and their parliamentary press units.

The last section will provide an analytical framework for understanding the PAs' communication practices and media management approaches. For this, theories on news values and newsworthiness will be introduced, drawing from Parks (2019) and Harcup and O'Neill (2017, 2001). The conceptualisation of strategic, tactical, proactive and reactive behaviour complements this section. The focus will be particularly on the contribution of Nothhaft and Schölzel (2015) in the debate on the conceptualisation of communication strategy, utilising the work of von Clausewitz (2007) to provide greater analytical clarity. Those additional analytical reference points are provided to deepen the understanding of the interviewees' experiences of political communication processes. This section will also expand its analytical consideration towards the

potential implications of the Scottish electoral system and the size of the party groups for the strategies, tactics, and pursuit of news values by parliamentary offices. Those reflections will also refer to the previous sections' analytical sub-framework on the distinction between *groups* and *teams*. It will be shown that the different structural contexts incentivise or deter joint efforts, which consequently impacts strategic decisions on political communication by PAs and may shape the focus on particular news values when creating communication output. The adoption of news values and strategic decision-making address crucial elements of mediatisation and professionalisation:

- i. The concept of mediatisation centres around the shift of political actors from political logic to media logic, and two of the core elements of media logic are newsworthiness and news values.
- ii. Practices of creating, strategising and disseminating content will inform the extent to which core elements of the professionalisation theory are addressed. In particular, matters of autonomy of choice and expertise are key characteristics which will be reflected upon.

The different analytical sub-frameworks will help to gain a holistic understanding of the political communication dynamics in offices. While ensuring a multi-perspective view on the interplay among PAs and between PAs and relevant stakeholders, they will also provide insight into PAs' role in political communication by Scotland's parliamentarians.

6.1 Conceptualising Professionalisation and Mediatisation

6.1.1 Defining and Characterising the "Professional"

As mentioned in the literature review, professionalisation in the political context has been subject to considerable debate. Scholarly discussions on the professionalisation of politics and political communication have often focused on integrating methods in political campaigns that were initially utilised in marketing and public relations outside the political realm. Debates around Americanisation (Downs, 2012, Wagner, 2005, Blumler and Gurevitch, 2001), permanent campaigns (Koliastasis, 2014, Sparrow and Turner, 2001, Ornstein and Mann, 2000, Blumenthal, 1980) and modernisation (Tenscher, 2004, Gibson and Römmele, 2009) of political campaigning directly contributed to these discussions around the professionalisation of political

communication. However, it is notable that professionalisation is often under-theorised (Negrine and Lilleker, 2002). While there have been several suggestions on how to define professionalisation in the context of political campaigns and communication, these suggestions typically do not define what it means to be a professional political communicator or professional political worker. The provided definitions usually address professionalisation as a broader phenomenon in politics and relevant sub-fields but do not reflect on the concept of being a professional. Consequently, professionalism has remained a somewhat vague and elusive concept that often lacks clearly defined characteristics (Karlsen and Saglie, 2017, Negrine and Lilleker, 2002).

In their study on staff members of the Labour Party, Webb and Fisher (2003) attempted to provide greater clarity by identifying a set of characteristics defining political professionals: expertise, autonomy, mobility, commitment and self-regulation. In a later contribution by Webb and Kolodny (2006), those criteria were further discussed and applied to professional employees of political parties beyond Labour. The application of this conceptualisation by Karlsen and Saglie (2017) in another political context, in this case among staff members of political parties and parliamentarians in Norway, demonstrated its suitability for application in different political contexts. Considering the similarities of the roles and party staff members compared to PAs (compared, e.g., with McKee, 2021, Dale, 2015), the conceptualisation of "the professional" by Webb and Fisher (2003) has also been utilised as a part of the analytical framework of this research.

In the context of political professionals, expertise is understood as having received a particular education, training or a set of skills and experiences to deal with designated tasks, responsibilities and encountered situations (Webb and Kolodny, 2006, Webb and Fisher, 2003). However, reflecting on the results of Karlsen and Saglie (2017), a more comprehensive understanding of the term, by also considering knowledge and experience of relevant (political) processes (e.g., within the party or the parliament), should be understood as part of their expertise (see also Lettrari, 2020 reflecting on professionalisation in parliamentary context). Autonomy refers to having agency when dealing with issues and tasks. Professionals have the responsibility for the outcomes of their work based on their freedom to make their own decisions on how to deal with tasks and problems allocated to them (see Webb and Kolodny, 2006 also on the difference between professional and party bureaucrat). Consequently, autonomy as a political

professional would require the person to have, at least to some degree, the capacity and opportunity to act independently and, with this, to have ownership over their activities and outcomes. Mobility refers to the transferability of acquired skills and experiences from one workplace or context to another. Therefore, having a set of unique skills and experiences necessary to perform in a particular role without being able to utilise those somewhere else indicates that the investigated roles are either not, or just in a very limited sense, professions (Webb and Kolodny, 2006). Self-regulation refers to the adherence to a set of norms associated with the profession, implemented by professional peers, but also by self-control and voluntary adherence of the professional to these rules or norms (ibid.). These can be expressed in professional associations' codes of conduct, such as the Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA) (see PRCA, 2021). Commitment refers to the expectation that the professional will thrive in fulfilling the assigned tasks and responsibilities, utilising the provided autonomy and acquired skills (Webb and Kolodny, 2006, Webb and Fisher, 2003).

6.1.2 Mediatisation and the Political Professional: Political Logic versus Media Logic

Mediatisation, a theory and description of broader political trends, has already been addressed in the literature review. It describes the shift towards media logic in public and political life. Media logic refers to how reality is perceived, understood, and communicated, particularly by media actors (Altheide, 2016, Strömbäck, 2008, Altheide and Snow, 1979). The rising importance of mass media in political life has been subject to considerable debate, even before the term mediatisation was conceived (see, e.g., Habermas, 1990, Caddell, 1976). However, clarifying and operationalising this term is vital for this research project.

There has been a substantial debate on what constitutes and drives media logic. Media logic has been understood as a distinct way media actors understand reality and how to operate successfully (e.g., Walters, 2022, Altheide, 2016, Landerer, 2013, Couldry, 2012). For this, it is also essential to consider the medium and format the media outlet is publishing. The format matters in how information is understood, selected, processed and presented to the audience (Vos and Van Aelst, 2018, Casero-Ripollés et al., 2016, Esser, 2013). With the increasing importance of mass media in public and political life, particularly in the case of the increasing importance of broadcasting media (in the mid-/end-20th century) and, later, social media (in the 21st century), political actors started

to adapt to this logic to increase their public exposure through media outlets and platforms (see, e.g., Altheide, 2016, Esser and Matthes, 2013). The adjustments of political communication practices to journalists' needs are intended to increase the politician's reach by increasing the likelihood of being the subject of news coverage and ensuring that this coverage is as favourable as possible to them and their cause (see, e.g., Karlsen and Skogerbø, 2015, Landerer, 2014, Sparrow and Turner, 2001). In the literature, there has been a tendency to identify media logic and political logic as opposing poles, where the former contests and replaces the other (see, e.g., Landerer, 2013, Strömbäck and Esser, 2009).

One of the critical characteristics of the mediatisation of politics is the extensive permeation of media logic in the political sphere, which goes beyond electoral campaigning periods. Political actions and events, or even policies, are designed around the needs and logic of media actors. For example, they are providing exclusives to friendly journalists, staging media events or tailoring the presentation of political proposals to the news values pursued by relevant media outlets (see, e.g., Tenscher et al., 2016, Hobbs, 2016, Esser, 2013, Quinn, 2012, Sparrow and Turner, 2001, Loomis, 2000, Bowman, 2000, Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999).

The increasing utilisation of media advisers or spin doctors, or even the consideration of journalistic expertise in political processes, is, therefore, a critical indicator of this trend (see, e.g., Fisher, 2017, McKnight, 2015, Hobbs, 2016, Schmitz and Karam, 2013), even political actors' perception of political realities is affected by an internalised media logic. Mediatisation of politics incentivises the integration of skills and experiences suitable to address the aforementioned needs of media outlets (e.g., Campus, 2020a, Svallfors, 2017, McKnight, 2015, Fisher, 2014, Esser, 2013, Mazzoleni, 2008b, Strömbäck, 2008, Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999). Those needs are shaped by the aim to maximise the attention of the targeted audience among media consumers, which could be described as market logic or commercial logic (Landerer, 2013, Strömbäck and Esser, 2009, Mazzoleni, 2008a, Mazzoleni, 2008b).

The increasing commercialisation of the media landscape arguably increases the emphasis on market logic by media outlets and, with them, by extension, by political actors. However, it needs to be noted that authors such as Landerer (2013) and Brants and Van Praag (2006) also argue that there would be another form of media logic. They identified a media logic with a normative underpinning, which addresses the democratic

function of media to inform its audience and scrutinise politics irrespective of commercial consequences. In any case, utilising the techniques and instruments of professionals in media management and public affairs in political communications is an essential indicator of the mediatisation of politics. It connects both trends since the need to adapt the presentation of politics by political actors promotes the consideration of people in political processes who have or can develop the expertise necessary to address this need.

Political logic as an underlying analytical frame of politicians contrasts media logic. Landerer (2013) and Strömbäck (2008) noted that the term often lacks a clear operationalisation and conceptualisation. He argues that similar to his rejection of a single, coherent media logic, there would not be one political logic but several political logics. Landerer (2013) distinguishes between policy-driven logic, focusing on decision-making processes, and electorally-driven logic, emphasising office-seeking and vote-seeking motives. The former is normative-driven, analogous to the normative-driven media logic; the other focuses on the audience (i.e., voters), similar to the commercially-driven media logic. Other authors, such as Esser (2013), Lundby (2009), and Strömbäck (2008) do not follow the distinction between different types of political logic. Their definition of political logic is broader, capturing the electoral and policy-making dimensions. Irrespective of whether authors favour a clear distinction between competing logics or an overarching, single conceptualisation, both dimensions are usually addressed.

The intersection between mediatisation and professionalisation is also visible in the debate on the conceptualisation of media logic and political logic. Following the conceptualisations by Landerer (2013), commercially-driven media logic and electorally-driven political logic both focus on the audience (of either media or politics). Considering the role of media within the political system as a significant source informing public debate, commercially-driven media provides political actors with their electorally-driven logic the opportunity to influence the media coverage in their favour. By addressing the commercial needs of media and providing content to address the audience successfully, political actors can shape and influence the content served to the public. For this, media professionals who understand those needs and have the expertise (skills and experience) to address those can be utilised by political actors. This links the electorally-driven logic seeking to receive a favourable positioning in the public sphere

by political actors with the commercial logic of media actors (see, e.g., McKnight, 2015, Ornstein and Mann, 2000, Blumenthal, 1980 for debates on permanent campaigning and spin doctors). Consequently, while having distinct characteristics, political logic and media logic can share common ground, which needs to be considered when identifying mediatisation tendencies. Hence, finding elements indicating the internalisation of media logic by politicians or their assistants does not exclude the presence of political logic. Political logic might have even promoted this internalisation of media logic in the first place, e.g. for favourable positioning in future elections.

6.2 Conceptualising the Relationship between Parliamentarians and their Assistants: A Matter of Trust and three Principal-Agent Problems

The importance of trust in political environments and communication contexts has been the subject of considerable debate in the academic literature. The relationship between principals and agents is at the centre of those disputes, particularly when the agents' working output is exposed to critical stakeholders of the principal (see, e.g., Wiencierz et al., 2021, Abbott et al., 2020, Holyoke, 2017, Enos and Hersh, 2015, Miller, 2005, Spake et al., 1999). The Principal-Agent Theory has been utilised to get an insight into the working relationships and emerging conflicts resulting from diverging interests (e.g., different political goals and priorities) of principals and agents and to analyse ways to control consequent problems (among others, Abbott et al., 2020, Enos and Hersh, 2015, Spake et al., 1999). Those problems can include, in particular, the mismatch between political actors' expectations towards their agents' work output. These concerns, among other things, are caused by the (potential) differences in (political) priorities and the quantity and quality of the work output, going back to the need for trust between the parliamentarian and their PAs (Dale, 2015). Consequently, it is also used in this research project, with parliamentarians as the principals and parliamentary assistants as their agents.

Three underlying problems shape the Principal-Agent relationship: *hidden characteristics*, *hidden action* and *hidden intention* (see, e.g., Wiencierz et al., 2021, Spake et al., 1999). The *hidden characteristics* problem concerns the principal's lack of knowledge about the agent's ability to perform the assigned tasks, especially when the principal enters into a working relationship with the agent. This problem is not limited to the skills and experiences the agent may or may not have to do the required tasks but

also features of willingness to utilise them for the principal's benefit. The study provided by Enos and Hersh (2015) on campaigning activists illustrates how this problem manifests and poses challenges for political candidates. While electoral candidates need activists who volunteer as canvassers, their characteristics may prevent campaigning messages from being conveyed efficiently and effectively to potential voters.

The *hidden actions* problem addresses the principal's lack of knowledge about the actions undertaken by the agent on behalf of the principal once both entered and established a working relationship. An example of such a problem is illustrated by Holyoke (2017), who discusses incentives for lobbyists to represent their clients' positions when dealing with legislators and support political actions by those legislators who may contradict their clients' stated interests.

The *hidden intention* problem refers to the agent's unknown motivational drivers, goals, and objectives in his actions. It also covers the agent's lack of knowledge about the principal's aims, objectives, and expectations. The study by Abbott et al. (2020) illustrates the consequences of this problem for governors, in this context referring to powerful office holders in the executive, who are confronted with balancing the need to recruit competent personnel to govern efficiently with the necessity of having loyal staff members. While being loyal and capable is not necessarily a contradiction, the study shows that fulfilling both characteristics may often be unobtainable. Therefore, being asked to choose one over the other is not unusual: Appointing a competent individual with a lower degree of alignment or unknown intentions increases the problem of *hidden intentions*. If a loyal individual is appointed instead, the hidden intention problem is minimised since the overarching political goals are more aligned. Trust is at the core of all three issues; if all three problems are minimised, trust in the relationship between principal and agent will be increased. High levels of trust reduce the costs of monitoring or controlling the agent's activities. At the same time, it enables fruitful collaboration and increases opportunities to maximise the use of the agents' skill set (e.g., Wiencierz et al., 2021, Abbott et al., 2020, Spake et al., 1999). Consequently, by addressing these three outlined characteristics, the management of trust in this relationship directly affects how communication on behalf of the parliamentarian is undertaken and will need to be analysed to understand the communication process.

6.3 The Conceptualisation of the Interactions among Staff Members in Parliamentary Offices: The Distinction between Groups and Teams

The literature review (i.e., Sections 4.1 and 4.2) demonstrates that very little research has been done on parliamentary assistants. Therefore, their interactions within the parliamentary office and with other parliamentary offices are an under-researched "black box" at large (a notable exception for the German context can be found in the study provided by Lettrari, 2020). What is known, however, is that PAs are usually assigned to a broader range of tasks (McKee, 2021, Dale, 2015, Ryle, 1981). However, it is unclear to what extent those tasks, duties, and responsibilities assigned to PAs intersect and how PAs interact to complete them. It is also unclear what consequences those interactions have for their performance and the communication output of the office. To conceptualise the interactions between PAs, the distinction between *groups* and *teams* will be utilised to guide the analysis.

There has been a substantial discussion in the literature about whether *groups* and *teams* should be distinguished. The different positions in the scholarly debate on the distinction between *groups* and *teams* can be clustered into three schools of thought: Authors like Kozlowski and Bell (2003) use both terms synonymously. Those authors distinguish between different types of groups. In this context, the terms *group* and *team* are used as interchangeable umbrella terms for collectives embedded in an organisational context with common goals and tasks, a high degree of interaction among individuals who are part of this group/team, as well as the interdependency of tasks and duties performed within this group (Kozlowski and Bell, 2003). Scholars such as Sudhakar (2013), Spector (2012) and Reimer et al. (2017) agree with the argument that *groups* and *teams* have common characteristics but disagree that the terms are interchangeable. Spector (2012) identifies the qualities of their members' interaction, shared goals and objectives, and the allocation of specified roles as commonalities between *groups* and *teams*. Proponents of this school of thought argue that *teams* are a particular type of *group*; hence, they share those outlined characteristics but hold distinct features beyond those characteristics that separate them from other *group* subtypes.

In contrast to academic positions stating that *groups* and *teams* would be indistinguishable or of minimal difference, authors such as Katzenbach and Santamaria (1999) or Belbin (2004a) view *groups* and *teams* as two distinct concepts. Authors of this school of thought agree that both concepts share similar characteristics, such as a

minimum of interaction between the *group* and *team* members. However, they emphasise that the differences, such as the quality of interaction among *group members* compared to *team members*, are more significant. Therefore, they distinguish *groups* and *teams* as different types of collectives. Consequently, proponents of this view reject both notions, that *groups* and *teams* are the same or that *teams* are a mere sub-type of groups.

The foundation of the argument that *groups* and *teams* are different types of collectives relies on the assumption that characteristics of crucial dimensions, whose qualities define *groups* and *teams*, would be significantly different. Overall, *teams* have more interactive relationships among their members, and those members would have a higher degree of interdependence with each other than members of *groups*. The substantial differences between *groups* and *teams* manifest in different qualities on the critical dimensions concerning leadership, size, work outcomes, accountability of individual contributions, roles, and agenda-setting (see Katzenbach and Santamaria, 1999). Therefore, it is unsurprising that other authors, such as Reimer et al. (2017), Levi (2017), Williams and Castro (2010), and Kozlowski and Bell (2003), consider these dimensions when discussing different types of *groups* or *teams*. While it remains open whether these differences warrant the distinction between *groups* and *teams* as two different concepts, it provides a valuable framework for comparing how individuals within a workplace are organised and interact.

The analytical framework will utilise the differentiation between groups and teams put forward by Katzenbach and Santamaria (1999) and Katzenbach and Smith (2015) to distinguish the different ways of working on communication-related tasks that are organised in parliamentarians' offices. The dimensions used by their models are utilised to guide the analysis of how the work on external political communication is approached.

Katzenbach and Santamaria (1999) identify a range of dimensions to differentiate *groups* and *teams*. For this analytical framework, the focus will be on leadership, goal-setting, and accountability over the creation of communication output from the perspective of the parliamentary office and whether the communication output is a product of a collective interplay or the sum of individual efforts based on a clear division of labour. Another dimension, highlighted by Katzenbach and Smith (2015), is the degree of stability towards roles within *groups* and *teams*: are they fixed or relatively

flexible and movable to other members of staff in the parliamentary office (adapted from Leroy, 2001, in Zoltan and Vancea, 2015, p. 96)¹¹? The size of *groups* and *teams* is the last dimension that distinguishes both concepts. While *teams* usually have a limited number of members, the size of *groups* can vary (for an overview of the different group/team dimensions, see Table 1).

The leadership dimension is characterised by two poles, one with fixed and stable leadership over more extended periods and rotating and shared leadership selection based on the situation and the circumstances (see Katzenbach and Smith, 2015, Leroy, 2001, Katzenbach and Santamaria, 1999). The differentiation of the nature of leadership is not unproblematic in parliamentary offices, given that parliamentarians are employers and often the line managers of PAs (McKee, 2022a, 2022b, Dale, 2015, Flynn, 2012). The parliamentarian's supervisory position could – in the context of this theory – be interpreted as "fixed leadership". However, since it is unclear to what extent and how MPs and MSPs are involved in the working practices and interactions within their office, this leadership might be implemented in varying ways, which needs to be accounted for.

The dimension concerning goals and objectives also needs further consideration. Katzenbach and Santamaria (1999) distinguish between two approaches; for *teams*, it is characteristic that the individual members contribute to formulating goals and objectives. In contrast to this, members of a *group* have their goals and objectives set for them. In this research, setting goals is understood in the context of the overarching goals of re-election and promotion of the parliamentarian's work. *Teams* would involve deliberation and consultation of members to set goals and objectives to support the efforts of the parliamentarian. In contrast, *groups* in the context of parliamentary offices are explicitly instructed to achieve goals and objectives set by either the MP or MSP or the parliamentarian's designated representative (e.g., an office manager or chief-of-staff).

¹¹ Leroy particularly refers to Katzenbach and Smith's *The Wisdom of Teams* in his work, which is why the latter is also referenced in the table.

Dimension	Team	Group
Leadership by ...	... different team members depending on the member's suitability in the particular context. Leadership is rotating, and leadership functions and responsibilities are often shared.	Designated individual. The leadership is fixed: Work on the communication output is headed by an appointed individual who leads the communication efforts.
Goals and Objectives set by...	... the team; it deliberates and decides on goals and objectives and the working agenda.	... the leader; this does not exclude consultations with group members.
Accountability over communication output by ...	... the team as a whole: The communication output results from a joint effort, making identifying individual contributions difficult.	... the individual: Individual contributions to the communication output are identifiable, making the individual accountable for their contribution(s).
Communication Output is the product of ...	... collective effort: Several staff members are involved, and the communication output is primarily the result of their interactions (e.g. synergy effects) rather than the sum of individual efforts.	... individual efforts: Several staff members are involved, and the communication output is the sum of their efforts.
Roles in the communication process are ...	... flexible. Members have different roles. Incumbents of those roles can be changed, and roles can be adjusted to the particular situation.	... specified. They are fixed and allocated based on the demands of that role (e.g., professional experiences or skills).
Size	A small number of members characterises teams.	The number of group members can vary.

Table 1 Group and Team Dimensions and Characteristics (adapted from Katzenbach and Santamaria, 1999, and Zoltan and Vancea, 2015, with reference to Katzenbach and Smith, 2015, in Leroy, 2001)

When distinguishing *groups* from *teams*, accountability refers to identifying individual contributions and their qualities when evaluating the work outcome (e.g., a press release or a media event). *Teams* have a high degree of shared and mutual accountability since it is not just more challenging to identify individual contributions but also since the qualities of the product of *teamwork* are a result of the interactions within the *team* itself:

"A working group relies primarily on the individual contributions of its members for group performance, whereas a team strives for a magnified impact that is incremental to what its members could achieve in their individual roles."
(Katzenbach and Smith, 2015, pp. 117-118)

Katzenbach and Smith (2015) emphasise the importance of mutual accountability for *teams* compared to individual accountability in a *group*. Shared accountability towards external stakeholders is also a key feature. It emphasises that mutual accountability goes beyond the individual accountability of *team* members towards each other and includes joint accountability of the *team* towards their work product to outsiders (Katzenbach and Smith, 2015, pp. 83-88).

Closely connected with the question of whether there is individual or mutual accountability towards the working product, or in this context, the communication

output or communication "product", is whether this output is the result of individual contributions or a collective effort. The collective effort is characteristic of the interaction among *team* members, who work together rather than separately, which "magnifies the impact" of the individual activities, e.g. through synergy effects (Katzenbach and Santamaria, 1999, pp. 113-115). The degree of integration and coordination of individual *team* members, their skills and their roles is particularly relevant (Katzenbach and Smith, 2015, pp. 79-83), as much as every member needs to do "equivalent amounts of real work" (ibid., p. 79). It is emphasised that joint work and activities such as "commenting, reviewing, and deciding" (ibid., p. 79) over work results, approaches and goals are part of this.

Another criterion for distinguishing *groups* from *teams* is how members' skills are integrated into the efforts of the collective. Katzenbach and Santamaria (1999) explain this characteristic by referring to team-building and training practices in Marine boot camps. They highlight that *team* members must be able to change their roles, which corresponds to the notion of rotating and shared leadership as a feature of *teams*.

"By the time the team is ready for active duty, each member can fill every position. Most important, the highly cohesive group has learned when and how to function as a real team [...]." (Katzenbach and Santamaria, 1999, p. 115)

The authors emphasise that a minimum set of skills is required from *team* members: Problem-solving and decision-making skills, interpersonal skills and technical skills are necessary. However, Katzenbach and Smith (2015) highlight the importance of not emphasising individual members' skills when selecting *team* members from a pool of candidates. They explain that relevant skills are often learned while being part of a team; to them, *teams* are "vehicles for personal learning and development" (ibid., p. 70). In contrast, *group* roles usually emphasise technical skills and experiences (Katzenbach and Santamaria, 1999).

The last dimension concerns the size of *teams*. Although no specific size or threshold is provided, the authors emphasise that a well-functioning *team* has a limited number of members (Katzenbach and Smith, 2015, but also Belbin, 2004b). While *groups* are usually larger, they can vary in size. Due to their interactive and collaborative nature, they decided to include the size of *teams* as a criterion. A large number of members would be challenging for individual members when trying to interact constructively in a meaningful way with each other. Additionally, a large *team* would face problems

coordinating and facilitating collaboration (Katzenbach and Smith, 2015, Belbin, 2004b).

"Large groups face logistical issues like finding enough physical space and time to meet together confront more complex constraints, like crowd or herd behaviors, that prevent the intense sharing of viewpoints needed to build a team." (Katzenbach and Smith, 2015, p. 67)

The suggested conceptualisation of *groups* and *teams* helps to understand the interaction within and among parliamentary offices if they involve several staff members in communication-related tasks. However, communication-related tasks may be highly centralised and almost exclusively undertaken by one person. In those cases, the working arrangement is to be understood as a *solo effort*.

To conclude, the categories of *solo effort*, *team effort*, and group effort will be utilised to guide the analysis of PA's activities on political communication-related tasks. While group and team differentiation is used if more than one person is assigned to those tasks, *solo effort* refers to circumstances where only one person within the parliamentary office is designated to do communication-related tasks.

6.4 The strategic pursuit of newsworthy communication output?

Previous sections aimed to provide conceptual sub-frameworks for the relationships within the parliamentary offices and between parliamentarians and their staff members. While they are vital to understanding the working environment and context in which communication processes occur, they arguably do not capture the reasoning and character of how PAs make decisions on external communications. The introduced conceptual frameworks will also struggle to provide insight into how mediatisation and professionalisation shape those decisions. This gap in the analytical framework will be addressed in the following sections by introducing and discussing the debate on newsworthiness and news values, strategy and tactics, as well as proactivity and reactivity.

The debate on news values and newsworthiness will provide the foundation to understand and contextualise the accounts of PAs on the day-to-day workings of political communication. It will mainly focus on *news values* relevant to the experiences in the content creation process. The selection of *news values* draws in particular on the work by Parks (2019), who compared a wide range of different sets of news values and

identified the most commonly used ones, which will provide an analytical framework to conceptualise the activities of PAs when creating communication output.

Another vital element of the analytical framework provided to understand the communication practices of PAs are the distinctions between strategy and tactics, as well as proactivity and reactivity. Therefore, it is imperative to define those concepts and to provide a clear differentiation between proactive and reactive as well as strategy and tactics. The distinction between those related concepts will be utilised to get an insight into how – or to what extent – PAs plan and approach political communication. The section will conclude preliminary considerations based on the vote-seeking behaviour of parliamentary candidates in the Scottish context and possible incentives for parliamentarians of the same party to collaborate as a *group* or *team*. It will provide vital information about the political context and potential incentives, which need to be considered when utilising the analytical framework. They also help to link the analytical framework provided by this section with the previous section on the distinction between *groups* and *teams*.

6.4.1 *New Values, Newsworthiness and Media Logic*

In Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, theories around the mediatisation of politics were discussed. At the centre of the mediatisation hypothesis is the understanding that political actors adapt their thinking and actions to a media logic, which would replace political logic. Media logic refers to how media actors function and operate, particularly concerning what is considered newsworthy towards their audiences. News values determine whether and to what extent potential news is newsworthy. There has been a substantial debate on how practitioners determine newsworthiness; consequently, various competing sets of news values have been developed since Galtung and Ruge (1965) published their seminal work on this topic. In recent years, the focus of the debate has shifted towards the question of how news values are affected by the emergence of social network sites (such as Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook). The research on this topic produced further proposals for news values (e.g., Walters, 2022, Mast and Temmerman, 2021). These proposals reflect the changing realities media actors face with the rising importance of social media platforms.

It needs to be pointed out that news values are a conceptualisation for analytical purposes; the understanding of what constitutes newsworthy is often learned and

applied by journalists through practical experience (Bender et al., 2018, pp. 14-15). Communication practitioners often unconsciously apply news values without explicit knowledge of the theory (Bednarek and Caple, 2017, pp. 34-36, Brighton and Foy, 2007, p. 1). The utilisation of these conceptualisations of newsworthiness and news values in the context of this research is done to guide the analysis of the practices and approaches to political communication described by interviewees. However, they are not meant to be understood as a technique or method PAs (or other communication and PR practitioners) might consciously follow. It is an analytical framework that supports acquiring a better understanding of the rationale of PAs creating and approaching communication on behalf of MPs or MSPs and whether and to what extent PAs adopt a media logic in the process of creating communication output. In the literature, a wider range of news values has been identified; those different sets of news values identify various determinants of what shapes newsworthiness. While those sets identify shared news values even though differently labelled, there are also somewhat unique news values, such as *adventure* or *beauty* (see Parks, 2019, p. 797). For this analytical framework, the focus will be on the news values that can be found among those usually shared by the different sets of news values identified in the literature (see especially Parks, 2019, but also Harcup and O'Neill, 2017, Harcup and O'Neill, 2001). Those are, in particular, *proximity*, *impact/magnitude*, *timeliness*, *prominence*, *power elite*, *exclusivity*, *conflict* and *human interest*. Given the growing importance of social media in the public sphere and political communication (see Chapters 2 and 3), recently emerged news values of *shareability* and *audio-visuals* (see Harcup and O'Neill, 2017, and also discussions by Mast and Temmerman, 2021, Edgerly and Vraga, 2020) will also be integrated to account for potential approaches towards the creation of social media content on behalf of parliamentarians by PAs.

The aforementioned news values require further explanation to be utilised for analytical purposes. *Proximity* refers not just to spatial localisation but to the perceived closeness to a particular issue, topic or incident (see, e.g., Mast and Temmerman, 2021, Galtung and Ruge, 1965, but also Harcup and O'Neill, 2001 on *relevance*). This can be due to the minimal distance of the event or occurrence (such as a damaged feeder road in the respective area) and a felt closeness (e.g., a tragic incident in a sister city on another continent). The news value of *impact/magnitude* refers to the perceived severity or magnitude of the consequences of an event, phenomenon, or development (see, e.g.,

Bednarek and Caple, 2017, Brighton and Foy, 2007, Harcup and O'Neill, 2001). The more impact the covered issue has, particularly on the particular audience of a news outlet, the more newsworthiness is assigned to the specific news item. *Prominence* refers to the prominence of involved persons or places. The more involved or affected persons, places or entities are known or perceived as significant by the audience, the higher the newsworthiness the issue carries. The previous two news values implicitly address another news value of *elite people* or the *power elite*, as identified by Galtung and Ruge (1965) and Harcup and O'Neill (2017, 2001). This refers to news items that draw on one or several persons identified as part of an elite with significant (social, political, cultural or economic) power. *Conflict* addresses the qualities of news items that address tensions and disagreements between relevant actors and entities (e.g., institutions, parties, etc.), particularly if those conflicts are of a political nature (Parks, 2019). *Timeliness* addresses the need to cover issues or incidents on time, as closely as possible, to their occurrence (Parks, 2019, Bender et al., 2018). The news value of *human interest* refers to cases or stories with a high-intensity, emotional value (Parks, 2019, p. 800). *Exclusivity* addresses the need for uniqueness of stories or news content compared to other news covered by competing media outlets. Exclusive news content is newsworthy by not being addressed in other media outlets; information about the story is just available through the publishing outlet at the time of publication (Harcup and O'Neill, 2017, Cotter, 2010, Brighton and Foy, 2007). Access to *audio-visual* representations of a news item has been identified as another news value which is mainly, but not solely, related to the emergence of social media (Harcup and O'Neill, 2017). The *shareability* of content is another social media-related news value. It refers to the ability of news items to be shared on social media platforms and the likelihood of engagement and being shared by readers with their friends and followers, widening its reach (see, e.g., Parks, 2019, Welbers and Opgenhaffen, 2019, Harcup and O'Neill, 2017).

In the context of the discussions on news values, it also needs to be considered that these scholarly debates usually focus on news values identified among national media outlets but not local and regional media, which is problematic. Ekström et al. (2006), for example, found in their study on local media in Sweden that the type of scrutiny of local journalists towards politicians differs from national media outlets since in-depth investigations were uncommon. However, they emphasised that scrutiny would be

different rather than absent. Park et al. (2022) illustrated with their study on Australia that the expectations of local media audiences might also differ from those of national media. Community-oriented factors have been identified as the main drivers of the willingness to engage with local media, not editorial content. Although it is unclear to what extent the findings of these two studies apply to Scotland, both indicate that there is potential for variations of news values for local media compared to national media. For example, news content focusing on *Conflicts* might be less appealing to an audience that looks for community-oriented, positive, and identity-affirming news content. In this vein, Mathisen (2021) found in his study on sourcing practices in Norwegian local media that journalists would be elite-oriented but more willing than national media outlets to integrate residents' views in their reporting. This can be understood as confirming the finding regarding the expectation towards community-oriented reporting and promoting news content that voices residents' concerns and opinions instead of being dominated by local politicians.

Another factor that needs to be considered is the long-term decline of local media in Scotland, which could also have an impact (see Schlesinger, 2020, Blain and Hutchison, 2016). For one, the decreasing number of news outlets might increase the competition among parliamentary offices in positioning their communication output in local media outlets and on social media. Consequently, news values would play a significant role since higher newsworthiness would increase the likelihood of succeeding in this competition. Second, an increased workload might affect journalists due to cutbacks on personnel. Such a situation could make it easier for professionally crafted communication output addressing relevant news values to be placed in local media outlets, partially or as a whole, since they require fewer adjustments and editing.

6.4.2 *Strategic and Tactics, Proactivity and Reactivity in the Pursuit of News Values*

There has been a substantial debate on what constitutes a strategy in the communication context, visible in the different views on defining strategic communication. So far, there has not been a consensus, and recent contributions to the debate do not indicate that there will be one soon (see, e.g., Zerfass et al., 2018, Winkler and Etter, 2018, van Ruler, 2018, Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2015, Hallahan et al., 2007). While there are many proposals for a definition, most authors agree that one key characteristic of strategic communication is the presence of purpose and intent (van Ruler, 2018, Hallahan et al.,

2007, for a more critical engagement on *purposefulness* and *intent*, see Zerfass et al., 2018, Winkler and Etter, 2018). Nothhaft and Schölzel (2015) suggested that going back to the military origins of the term strategy and tactics would be helpful for further clarification. They defend their proposal against the notion that the initial usage of the term would now be too far removed from communication contexts. In their contribution to the debate on defining *strategic communication*, they attempt to utilise *On War* by von Clausewitz (2007) to clarify the ambiguous and contested conceptualisation of strategic communication.

In *On War*, von Clausewitz (2007) characterises a *strategy* as "the use of engagements for the object of the war", while *tactics* are "the use of armed forces in the engagement" (ibid., p. 105). To put this definition into a broader, non-military context, *strategy* can be characterised as an attempt to shape situations before they materialise by engaging with the environment to achieve a specific goal. On the other hand, *tactics* would attempt to deal with a situation when it occurs and achieve a favourable outcome from this engagement. Tactics are linked to strategies since they refer to a situation (or engagement, as per Clausewitz) within a strategic context. Consequently, *tactics* have a reactive element since they require engagement with the situation when it materialises. *Strategy* is about proactive engagement: anticipating upcoming situations, making plans accordingly, and shaping the environment before the issue manifests. The aim is to influence the environment where possible so that a materialising situation is more favourably shaped for achieving one's aims, or at least to anticipate situations and prepare oneself to deal with them in a way that the overall goals are accomplished (see Botan, 2006 in the context of grand strategies, but also Negrine et al., 2007, or Kiouisis and Strömbäck, 2015 on crisis communication). The difference between proactive and reactive also needs to be clarified in this context: Proactivity refers to an activity or behaviour that occurs before a particular situation or issue materialises to position oneself more favourably to deal with that issue or situation. Reactivity refers to a behaviour or activity which is initiated at the moment the situation occurs. In other words, proactive behaviour attempts to shape an issue or situation favourably before it manifests. In contrast, reactivity is an activity that deals with the situation not earlier but when it arises (Grant and Ashford, 2008, Crant, 2000, Bateman and Crant, 1993).

In the context of this research, a communication strategy is understood as an approach that attempts to understand, monitor, anticipate and influence the communication

environment to either create favourable situations for producing communication output or to be able to position oneself favourably in emerging situations (e.g., crises or opportunities). Considering the debate of pursuing newsworthiness, this can be understood as an attempt to influence the communication environment so that news values utilisable to the content creator(s) can be employed in the communication output to increase its reach and support the political aims of the parliamentarian. Communication tactics aim to deal with communication situations successfully, regardless of whether they are initiated, planned or emergent. It encompasses how news values are utilised when creating communication outputs to promote the parliamentarian or their work. Proactivity in this context refers to behaviour directed to upcoming communication engagements before they manifest, for example, preparatory work in advance of anticipated media requests. In contrast, reactivity refers to communication activities aiming to deal with a communication engagement at the moment they manifest. Such a reactivity could be, for example, the PA asking the parliamentarian for a quote to respond to a journalist's request for a comment on a policy proposal. For reactive and proactive activities, the focus will be mainly on utilising news values in the process of content creation.

6.4.2.1 Strategies for Communication Efforts? The Choice between Pursuing Personal Votes and Party Votes

There has been a substantial debate on how the set-up of electoral systems creates incentives for a particular type of campaigning and messaging strategies. Political communication and political news coverage are shaped by different factors, such as the political system (see, e.g., Hoffjann, 2021, Waddle et al., 2019, Vos and Van Aelst, 2018); the degree of the mediatisation of politics (see, e.g., Grafström and Rehnberg, 2022, Garland, 2017, Vos, 2014) and professionalisation of the political environment (see, e.g., Rafter, 2017, Downs, 2012, Negrine et al., 2007). The electoral system's specific design has also been identified as a factor (e.g., Sabag Ben-Porat and Lehman-Wilzig, 2021, De Winter and Baudewyns, 2015, Strohmeier, 2002). The first-past-the-post (FPTP) system, for example, the one utilised in the United Kingdom, provides individual contestants with strong incentives to seek personal votes instead of party votes. In many proportional representation systems, it is more important to harness party votes than to seek personal votes (e.g., Hofstetter, 2016, Carey and Shugart, 1995, but also Poole, 2019). Campaigning strategies based on seeking party votes are

characterised by the campaigner's tendency to emphasise their relation to their party. Campaigners who are aiming to get personal votes will tend to highlight personal features and their personal preferences during the campaign while putting less emphasis on their standing within their party (see, e.g. Nemoto and Shugart, 2013, Carey and Shugart, 1995). However, there is already a broader tendency for personalisation and privatisation of political communication, irrespective of the electoral system (see, e.g. Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014, Van Aelst et al., 2011, van Aelst et al., 2008). Studies on electoral behaviour also highlight the relevance of voters' party preferences and partisanship in electoral systems with a plurality or majority rule. For example, the legislative behaviour of the individual MP in those systems has only a limited impact on the electoral behaviour (see Fleming, 2022, Vivyan and Wagner, 2012, but also Carey and Shugart, 1995). Additionally, candidates in FPTP systems rely on their party's and party activists' resources in their campaigning efforts (see, e.g. Fieldhouse et al., 2020, Middleton, 2018). The access to resources and the need for support from the party to be selected as their candidate should also be considered (see, e.g. Battle, 2019, p. 538 on candidate selection in Scotland). Arguably, this limits the tendency to seek personal votes by putting themselves at the forefront of the campaign and their party (and party policies) at the back. To conclude, both trends, seeking party votes in PR systems and personal votes in plurality systems, have clear limitations. Candidates in PR systems will still have personal elements, while candidates in FPTP systems will not neglect to emphasise their link to their party in their campaigns.

The differences in emphasising a person or party in campaigns are further blurred in electoral systems that mix elements of proportional representation and plurality or majoritarian rule. This becomes particularly apparent in the German electoral system until 2023. While half of the seats are given to parliamentarians with constituency mandates, the other half is distributed based on list mandates (Bundestag, 2021). To make sure that the composition of the Bundestag is representative of the parties' successes based on the list-bound votes, there is a mechanism in place to adjust the allocation of list mandates in a way that overproportionate success in achieving constituency mandates is taken into account¹² (see Bundestag, 2021). Candidates selected to compete in constituencies are often placed on the regional party list

¹² The German electoral system has been changed several times in the last ten year. However, there has always been a compensation mechanism to ensure that a high degree of proportionality is achieved.

(Schindler et al., 2021, Manow, 2012). Consequently, those candidates are incentivised to campaign for party and personal votes. Gschwend and Zittel (2015) highlight that despite the proportionality of Germany's electoral system, there is a personalisation of electoral campaigns by constituency candidates with a measurable impact on the voting behaviour in the constituency (particularly on non-partisan voters). However, Sieberer (2010) found in his study that deviating behaviour by constituency MPs in legislature votes cannot be explained by attempting to cultivate personal votes for the next election. Consequently, there are clear limitations to the argument of constituency MPs aiming for personal votes instead of party votes during their tenure.

Like the electoral system in Germany, Scotland utilises a Mixed-Member-Proportional system. However, the plurality element is more pronounced. More than half of the mandates (57%) are allocated based on FPTP, making it more disproportionate (for comparing the disproportionality of electoral systems in the UK, see Figure 4). While the Scottish electoral system is less proportional than the one for general elections in Germany, it also provides a mechanism to bridge the discrepancy between the number of won mandates and received party list votes. The mechanism increases the proportionality of the overall composition of the Scottish Parliament compared to the House of Commons and the Welsh Assembly. Still, it does not tend to create outcomes as proportionate as the German electoral system.

The degree of disproportionality results from constituency mandates being more relevant than in Germany. In those cases, the additional security through dual candidacy by candidates of bigger parties is limited. While this is also true for German dual candidacies, the limitation of additional security is more pronounced in Scotland due to the greater weight of constituency mandates (and the consequent disproportionality). However, smaller parties that do not have a realistic chance to win constituency mandates can increase the chances of their candidates by placing them on top of their party lists since they still profit from the aforementioned mechanism. Therefore, list candidates of bigger parties who also compete for constituency mandates are more likely to be incentivised to seek personal votes, especially given the comparatively low number of list mandates available. List candidates of smaller parties with limited opportunities to obtain such a constituency mandate, on the other hand, are more likely to seek party votes since it would increase their chance to receive or defend their mandate.

The political culture in Scotland might further strengthen the incentive to emphasise personal mandates by bigger parties. While the devolution and the consequent creation of the Scottish Parliament aimed to promote "new politics" different to the majoritarian design of the Westminster model, the political culture of Scotland is still influenced and somewhat shaped by the Westminster style of doing politics (see Mitchell, 2010, Keating, 2020b). Broader trends in the UK's political system, such as the professionalisation of politics, are also mirrored (see Keating et al., 2020). The influence of a majoritarian political culture might create an additional incentive, external to the electoral system, to prioritise seeking personal votes in the pursuit of gaining constituency mandates rather than list mandates by parliamentarians (see debates in the Scottish MMP context on dual mandates, the tense relationship between list and constituency parliamentarians, and constituency shadowing, e.g., Haines and Parker, 2022, Battle, 2019, Cairney and McGarvey, 2013, pp. 65-69, Bradbury and Mitchell, 2007, Carman and Shephard, 2007).

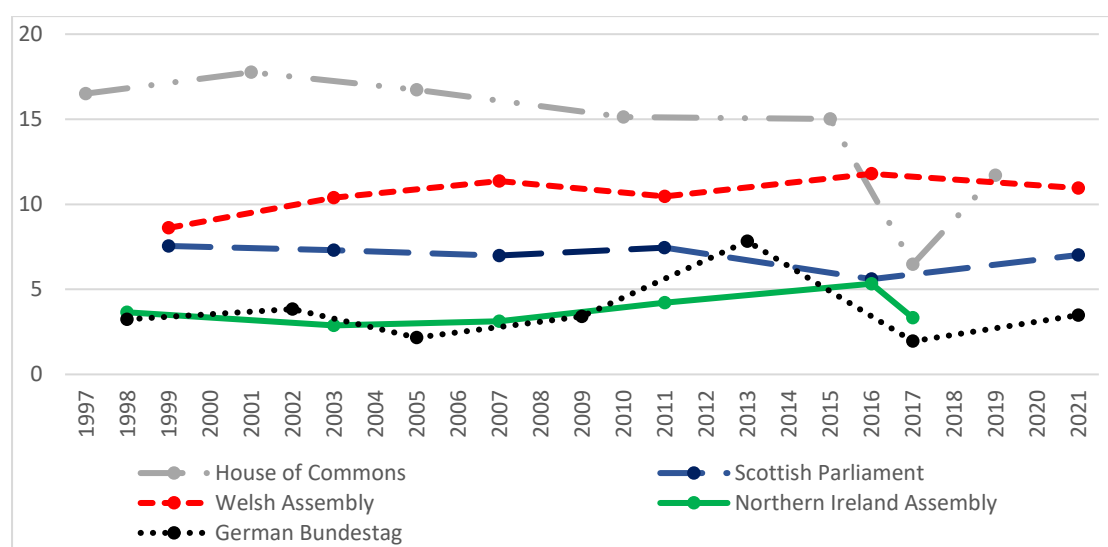


Figure 4 Gallagher indices for elections in the UK and Germany between 1997 and 2021 (the Institute for Government provided indices for UK elections on request by email; the indices for German general elections are based on calculations by the researcher). The Gallagher index measures the disproportionality of an election (based on the number of votes considering the proportion of won mandates). The lower the score (y-axis), the higher the proportionality of elections.

Party-vote seeking and personal-vote seeking behaviour are approaches to win or retain a parliamentary mandate. While the literature on party-vote and personal-vote-seeking campaigning behaviour often focuses on electoral campaigns, it can arguably be used to understand broader political communication efforts by elected representatives. For instance, considering the literature around permanent campaigning (see Section 2.3), it

can be assumed that parliamentarians' political communication outside electoral cycles follows a similar pattern. However, outgoing communication might also attempt to promote or support policies, campaigns, and organisations favoured by the parliamentarian rather than putting the MP/MSP at the forefront of the communication output.

It also needs to be considered that several MPs and MSPs might decide not to aim for re-election. In those cases, communication with vote-seeking behaviour is likely limited. Depending on the circumstances, outgoing parliamentarians might still want to support vote-seeking communication by their offices on their behalf to support their party or the potential successor. Consequently, any tendency to intentionally issue personal-vote-seeking or party-vote-seeking communication is limited by the parliamentarian's willingness to seek re-election and other competing purposes behind communication on behalf of the MP or MSP. However, those purposes, for example, promoting a particular policy or initiative, might indirectly promote personal votes or party votes for the parliamentarians or their party by affiliating themselves or their party with a specific policy proposal or event.

6.4.2.2 Joint and Group Efforts of Communication in Parliamentary Groups?: Preliminary Consideration and Conceptual Limitations

While using the differentiation between *groups* and *teams* will provide insight into the structural constraints and incentives for interactions between parliamentarians' offices, it also has limitations that need to be considered. The discussion of the model in the previous section has already highlighted that *team* composition is a crucial factor, but this primarily refers to individual members of either a *group* or a *team*. However, the interaction between the different offices in this chapter relates to entities rather than individuals. In this section, those entities are used analogously to provide a framework to help analyse the interactions between parliamentary offices. So far, this chapter has focused on how those interactions and arrangements influence the communication processes within these offices. Another vital difference from the previous section is the number of people and entities involved. Parliamentary offices are typically composed of a small number of people (compared with McKee, 2021, Dale, 2015, Flynn, 2012). While a small number of individuals is a necessary precondition for forming a *team*, fulfilling this criterion alone is insufficient (see Belbin, 2004a, Chapter 3). Consequently, large parliamentary groups within the Scottish parliament (from the SNP,

the Scottish Labour Party and the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party) are less likely to form a *team*. Smaller parliamentary groups, such as the Scottish Greens and Scottish Liberal Democrats, on the other hand, fulfil the requirement of having a small number of members and are therefore better placed to approach communication as a *team effort*.

The discussion of whether Scottish parliamentarians in the MMP system are incentivised to pursue personal or party votes also points to systemic constraints for team-building processes within parliamentary groups. Parliamentarians who seek a constituency mandate might try to distinguish themselves from competitors of other parties and their party to receive personal votes, which is a detriment to working as an integrated *team* member. However, parliamentarians aiming to retain a constituency mandate might still participate in *teamwork* and party-vote-seeking activities. A possible driver could be differences in the appreciation of the relevance of party-oriented voting behaviour for the parliamentarian's overall electoral success. Another consideration might be that the constituency mandate is deemed safe, weakening the tendency to seek personal votes. Additionally, engaging in *teamwork* might be pursued to implement or support favoured policies, overshadowing any immediate (re-)election-related concerns. An additional factor moderating personal vote-seeking motives in communication efforts could be the option to be a constituency candidate and a list candidate simultaneously, particularly for candidates of parties struggling to win constituencies. Not engaging in *team* efforts could put those politicians at a disadvantage since the party might decide not to re-select the parliamentarian or to put the candidate on an unfavourable place on the regional list, thus reducing their chance for re-election.

Further structural factors might additionally incentivise the pursuit of joint efforts for some parties, particularly the availability of resources. The capacity to finance parliament-based press and research units is limited for smaller parliamentary parties in opposition. They receive less "short money" than bigger opposition parties¹³ (Atherton, 2020). Due to the smaller size of their parliamentary group, fewer parliamentarians could poll parts of their staff allowance to co-finance staff members of those units. Consequently, those units have a reduced capacity to promote policies of the

¹³ Short money refer to the financial support, opposition parties are entitled to in order to carry out their activities in parliament.

parliamentary group, which limits their ability for media-related work and produce political communication output. Those limitations might incentivise parliamentary offices of smaller parties to pursue communication as a joint effort to create synergy effects (see, e.g., Katzenbach and Smith, 2015) to maximise their limited communication capacities. Considering that a limited number of potential members is a crucial requirement for effective *teamwork*, the reduced size of the parliamentary group of small parties would provide a favourable environment for joint communication efforts.

6.5 Concluding Remarks on the Analytical Framework

The introduced analytical sub-frames aim to help conceptualise critical elements of the communication practices of parliamentary assistants. The relationship between parliamentarians and PAs and the interplay between the involved PAs, directly and indirectly, shape the communication approach. The third analytical sub-frame provides a conceptual device for analytically engaging with the decision-making process on strategy and tactics and the content creation and dissemination process. These three sub-frames are not stand-alones, but they help to provide a holistic view of how communication is approached. Together, they provide a clear framework to answer the two research questions outlined at the end of the literature review. All subframes build on the conceptual foundation comprising the mediatisation and the professionalisation hypothesis.

The theories on professionalisation and mediatisation have been operationalised and conceptually linked. They provide a conceptual benchmark for all subframes by having core elements of their theories directly embedded in them or by providing analytical context. Consequently, this chapter's operationalisation of mediatisation and professionalisation will help connect the findings that address different aspects and dimensions of the external communication process in parliamentary offices. Beyond this, utilising these two concepts will also allow the linking of the research results to the broader debates in the literature. Although there has been an exhaustive debate on both theories (see Chapters 2, 3 and 6.4), there has been little attempt to explore whether and how broader trends of mediatisation and professionalisation translate into day-to-day communication practices on behalf of individual parliamentarians. The analytical framework introduced in this thesis will help to address this gap.

The next chapter will discuss the methodology of this research project. It will outline this investigation's epistemological and ontological approach and the methods employed to collect and analyse the data. Lastly, it will focus on ethical considerations and the suitability of the utilised methods compared to other potentially usable methods.

7 Methodology

7.1 Research Questions

1. What importance do parliamentary offices assign to media management and political communication outside the purdah period?
2. How is the relationship between parliamentarian and media managed and political communication planned, designed, and executed in a parliamentary office?

7.2 Overview

This chapter will outline how the posed research questions will be addressed. The first section will reflect on the underpinning philosophical assumptions of this research project and explain why a qualitative approach has been chosen. The subsequent section will discuss the different qualitative methods that could be employed; the selection of methods discussed orients itself to approaches utilised in similar research settings. The focus will be ethnography, focus groups and group interviews, process tracing, and expert interviews.

After the methodological considerations, the suitability of Scotland as a case for this research project will be evaluated. This section focuses on the extent to which Scotland can be classified as a "typical case". Tracy's (2010) criteria for quality in qualitative research will be the overarching theme in the last section of this chapter. The "big-tent" quality criteria for qualitative research will be utilised as an analytical frame to systematically discuss the methods to gather and analyse data and answer the research questions. Furthermore, it will also discuss ethical implications and how this research's results will be disseminated.

7.3 Underpinning Philosophy

This thesis aims to reconstruct communication processes of and within closed settings of parliamentary offices. The research project is embedded in an interpretivist epistemological understanding, which is characterised by the assumption that understanding human action requires a different approach than natural science. This stance is opposed to the positivism of, e.g., Durkheim or Comte, which assumes that the way human behaviour is to be studied is not fundamentally different to natural sciences

(see Benton and Craib, 2011). The nature of this approach is interpretivist, whose foundations are rooted in Weber's *Verstehen* approach (Ritzer, 2011, Soeffner, 2005, Whimster, 2003). *Verstehen* is an attempt to acquire an in-depth understanding of social phenomena and social actions of actors which are analysed. This attempt to gain an in-depth, systematic understanding is characterised by aiming to understand the logic those social actors apply in their actions and the symbols they use as well as the meaning of their (social) action (see, e.g., Howell, 2013, Bryman, 2012, Benton and Craib, 2011, Okasha, 2002).

Weber's concept of *Verstehen* derived from the field of hermeneutics, which was initially concerned with text analysis. He utilised this field and "extend[ed] the idea from the understanding of texts to the understanding of social life" (Ritzer, 2011, p. 117). This approach is an ontological statement upon which research should build rather than a method (ibid., but also Oliver, 1983). Benton and Craib (2011) illustrated this claim as follows: "There is no such thing as a society, but if the people we are studying think there is and take it into account in their everyday actions, then we can take it as existing – it is real in its effects, and these effects are achieved through individual actions." (ibid., pp. 87-88)

The interpretivist approach addresses this ontological statement; it emphasises that human behaviour needs to be studied by investigating social actions and their meaning (see Chowdhury, 2014). Interpretivist inquiries aim to identify and understand the causal mechanism of social nature, while positivist approaches seek to identify causal relationships (see Lin, 1998). Even though both approaches are often understood as irreconcilable, Lin (1998) emphasises that they should be rather seen as complementing each other. It also needs to be noted that interpretivist approaches are concerned with causal mechanisms and the contexts in which they occur (see, e.g., Chowdhury, 2014, Bryman, 2012, Lin, 1998).

Interpretivist approaches are primarily addressed through qualitative methodologies, which will also be employed in this research project. However, as Bryman (2012) notes, quantitative data may also be utilised in some cases to conduct social research. There has been considerable debate about whether quantitative and qualitative approaches can be combined. While pragmatists emphasise the complementary nature of quantitative and qualitative research (see, e.g., Bryman, 2012, Morgan, 2014), others disagree and argue that both may not be compatible (see, e.g., Morgan, 1998, Smith and Heshusius,

1986, Guba, 1985). Given the different underlying assumptions of the nature of reality for quantitative and qualitative research, this research project will employ a qualitative inquiry. It assumes that investigated processes and their context are constructed by social interaction and meaning, a view which is primarily addressed by a qualitative approach (see also Howell, 2013, Bryman, 2012, May, 2005).

7.4 Methodological Considerations

The previous section has explained the underlying philosophical assumptions of this research project. Accordingly, a qualitative approach with an abductive strategy to investigate the posed research questions will be employed (see also Bryman, 2012). In the following section, different qualitative methods of inquiry that have been used in similar research contexts will be evaluated regarding their suitability to address the posed research questions. The focus will be on ethnographies, focus groups and group interviews, process tracing, and expert interviews. After examining the different methods, the subsequent section will explain why this research project relies on expert interviews.

To evaluate and anticipate potential problems during the fieldwork, I conducted informal talks with individuals who either work as parliamentary assistants or have considerable experience working with them (e.g., campaigners, special advisers or former lobbyists). A common theme has been that parliamentary assistants and their employees are under severe time constraints. It has been emphasised in those talks that the more time they need to invest in this project as a participant, the less likely participation will be (also confirmed by Bogner et al., 2014, Littig, 2008). Furthermore, it has been emphasised that the topic may be sensitive, and parliamentarians may not want their employees to engage with my request. It was, therefore, necessary to provide assurances regarding the confidentiality and anonymity of interviews; otherwise, it would have been challenging to find enough interviewees for this research project (see also Lancaster, 2017). The sensitivity of the topic and the fact that access to a closed group (in this case, Scottish politicians and their employees) or a closed setting (parliamentary offices) is needed requires utilising snowball sampling, already existing relationships (e.g., via former colleagues) and systematic requests via email as well as follow-ups via phone in order to gain access to the necessary information (see, e.g., Bogner et al., 2014, Bryman, 2012, Littig, 2008).

In recent years, ethnographies have been utilised to improve the understanding of political communication processes (see Luhtakallio and Eliasoph, 2017). Spitulnik and Peterson (2012) argue that the method provides the opportunity to help explore "the everyday workings of political communication" and assist in understanding the "deeply human experience of political communication on both the production and reception ends" (ibid., p. 264). However, ethnographies require access to the settings that should be investigated. Bryman (2012) distinguishes between closed settings (such as an organisation) and public settings (for example, a public playground), which differ in terms of accessibility.

The research setting in this research project is to be classified as "closed". It requires the permission of an MSP or MP and the willingness of their staff members to accept an outsider to observe and interact with them over a period of time. In preliminary talks, individuals working in parliamentary offices or similar settings have highlighted that access may not be granted given that staff members and politicians may see it as a risk to the confidentiality of sensitive information and an additional burden for their workload. Similar experiences have been made by Lancaster (2017) and Rhodes and Tiernan (2015). It also has to be considered that accessibility difficulties do not just concern the initial entry into a closed setting but may also impede the availability of data within the setting once permission to enter into the closed setting has been granted. This issue became particularly apparent during the fieldwork when participants were unwilling to show, e.g., drafts, notes or their organisation of the diary. Considering the importance of trust and personal connection (see McKee, 2023, Dale, 2015, Flynn, 2012) in this context and my status as an outsider to Scottish politics, the lack of access is not surprising. Requests on whether offices would agree in principle to participate in ethnographies were rejected. While it has been considered to use an ethnographic approach as a complementary strategy at a later stage, i.e., after first contacts with parliamentary offices have been made during interviews, the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020 further minimised the chance to access parliamentary offices.

An ethnography also limits the research to the study of very few settings. Potentially differences between the workings of individual offices caused by different parties (e.g., small parties like Liberal Democrats and Greens compared to SNP and Labour), different locations (e.g., Glasgow as an urban region compared to Highlands and Islands as a rural region covering a wide area) and different types of mandates (list mandate

compared to constituency mandate) may be difficult to capture if the research was limited to very few settings. This problem could be addressed by picking a typical case (see Gerring, 2007) and employing ethnography. However, it is unclear how typical arrangements concerning approaches and organisation of political communication in parliamentary offices could be characterised and whether this could be identified before the fieldwork was undertaken, given that relevant information may not be publicly available. Beyond the difficulty of identifying a suitable case (and the lack of access to it), interviews provide the advantage of letting interviewees reflect and explain their actions. Interviews help to address why something is done in a particular way, i.e., the rationale and the reasoning driving their actions not just in the present but also in the past (Gerson and Damaske, 2021). It assists in "uncovering the unobservable" (ibid., p. 6), "discovering the unknown [and] explaining the known" (ibid., p. 9), which resonates with the research questions. Another method utilised in similar research settings is group interviews or focus groups (see, e.g., Rhodes and Tiernan, 2015). Both methods are very similar; they aim to explore group norms and group processes. However, focus groups differ regarding the encouragement of interaction between the interviewees and the interviewer (see Bryman, 2012, May, 2005). Employing group interviews or focus groups may be fruitful if utilised among teams of employees of one parliamentary office. However, it would be difficult to apply them given the already mentioned time constraints of parliamentary assistants: Scheduling and keeping appointments may be difficult for the individual participants. Additionally, it would occupy 90 to 150 minutes of their time, which would be a further problem in the recruitment process (see May, 2005).

Group interviews and focus groups may also address topics perceived as (politically) sensitive and subject to confidentiality issues. This would be another obstacle to recruiting participants willing to share information (see, e.g., Rhodes and Tiernan, 2015). In the interview, it may be challenging to encourage participants to contribute when discussing topics where sharing the information with outsiders (either people not working in the same office(s) or non-party members) would have been perceived as problematic. Therefore, focus groups and group interviews were not chosen to address the posed research questions.

During the early stages of this research project, I considered using process tracing as a primary research method. Process tracing is a method in which the researcher, through

analysing various sources such as interview transcripts, archive material and different types of documents, identifies causal processes (see George and Bennett, 2005) and draws causal inferences. Collier (2011) defines process tracing as a method which systematically examines "diagnostic evidence, selected and analysed in light of research questions [...] posed by the investigator" (ibid., p. 823). The key characteristic of process tracing is emphasising a thorough, detailed description to trace the investigated phenomenon's different variables. Therefore, close attention must be paid to uncovering the sequence of the different variables (see Collier, 2011, Mahoney, 2010).

Process tracing could be employed in this research project by identifying events of political communication involving parliamentary offices, such as campaigns, and tracing back the communication process through interviews with relevant stakeholders and public and private documents (e.g., email exchanges, briefings, newspaper articles and press releases). However, as previously mentioned, access to informants may be minimal and could not be guaranteed. This might be particularly problematic if the information is seen as confidential or sensitive (Rhodes and Tiernan, 2015), which would also affect the accessibility of any relevant document (such as emails or briefings) not in the public domain. The sampling frame of possible observations would be smaller, while access to the data within the sampling frame would still be very limited, posing a significant risk for the research project. In light of the research question, which aims to uncover daily workings and how communication is arranged and organised, process tracing may also not be suitable to have a better understanding of rather reactive aspects of the communication between the parliamentarians' offices and the public or media outlets: responding to "on-off" media request or representing daily work on social media which may not be part of the particular political campaign may be underrepresented even though it may be a substantial element of the communication activities.

Another approach utilised in similar research settings is elite interviews or expert interviews (see, e.g., Lancaster, 2017, Fisher, 2017, Blöbaum et al., 2016, Fisher, 2014, Tenscher, 2004, Phillipps, 2003). They can be utilised to reconstruct and explore social processes and are usually embedded in a qualitative research paradigm (see Gläser and Laudel, 2009a). There has been considerable debate on what constitutes an expert. Gläser and Laudel (2009b) emphasise the different understandings of what characterises a person as an expert and distinguish between two positions. "Experts" can be narrowly

defined as carriers of specialist knowledge "usually produced by designated processes of learning and training" (ibid., p. 118) or, more broadly, as individuals with special knowledge about the social phenomenon that should be studied.

This difference between those two definitions may be more evident if the type of knowledge experts are supposed to carry is more clearly defined. Wassermann (2015) describes two types of knowledge that qualify people as experts: contextual and procedural. Contextual knowledge refers to "objective" knowledge about institutions, rules and actors whereby the interviewed expert is not an active part of the sphere he is reporting about. Procedural knowledge refers to knowledge acquired through one's activities in the field. Being in command of one of these two types suffices to be seen as an expert. Meuser and Nagel (2009) reinforce that narrowing the term "expert" to knowledge solely acquired through training or profession should be avoided. They also warn against inflating the term to a point where any person is seen as an expert. Experts distinguish themselves from others through special knowledge, insight and active participation in the field of interest. In this research project, individuals are interviewed not as private persons but in their function within this field through which the expertise has been acquired, which primarily addresses procedural knowledge.

Qualitative content analysis is utilised to analyse the collected data; the analysis has been done in NVivo (see Figure 5). Content analysis allows for the reconstruction of social processes, is systematic, and is particularly suitable for this research project. It forces an equal engagement with all the collected data. While preliminary theoretical considerations are used to categorise and analyse the text during the initial coding in the first stage, it is still open to change when new or unexpected categories and themes emerge. In the second stage, key themes (such as trust, teamwork, and selection of issues for communication output) were identified, and interviews with interviewees concerning those themes were compared to identify patterns and influence factors. In this stage, quotes by interviewees, which are deemed to describe those identified patterns and determinants particularly well, are selected to illustrate the analysis results in the findings chapters. Overall, qualitative content analysis is deemed particularly suitable for expert interviews (see Gläser and Laudel, 2009a, but also Hsieh and Shannon, 2005 on qualitative content analysis, and Vaismoradi et al., 2013 to compare content and thematic analysis). It addresses the aim of reconstructing communication

processes to understand the role of communication officers and answers the research questions.

Stage 1

Notes were taken during the fieldwork, especially when critical processes and key factors were addressed in the interviews (e.g., trust, recruitment, and sign-off processes).



Stage 2

The transcripts of interviews underwent a thorough systematic initial coding in NVivo to identify processes and factors. Based on the notes and observations in stage one, initial results have been used to inform the analytical framework.



Stage 3

The coding in NVivo has been systematically revised and categorised, addressing relevant processes and factors identified as the most relevant determinants for PAs' political communication-related work. The analytical framework(s) has been applied to understand how those processes and factors are related. During the categorising and sorting process, relevant quotes deemed most suited to illustrate these observations were identified, anonymised, and edited for illustrative purposes in the thesis.

Figure 5 The Process of Analysing the Interviews

The utilisation of expert interviews in this research project provides a significant advantage compared to the methods of ethnography, focus group, group interviews, and process tracing that have already been discussed. Tracy's eight "big-tent" criteria (2010) are utilised in Chapter 7.6 to have an analytical framework in which the different methods and their suitability for this research project can be compared with expert interviews. Those criteria for measuring the quality of qualitative research have been well-received within the scientific community. They are established as standards to measure and ensure the quality of qualitative research projects (see Chowdhury, 2015, Gordon and Patterson, 2013, Ravenek and Rudman, 2013), making them a particularly suitable reference point for developing a research methodology.

7.5 Scotland as a typical case?

Little is known about the role of parliamentary assistants in the political communication process of MPs. Previous research focused on spin doctor's influence on the decision-making in campaigning and political communication by politicians with a comparatively high rank in the political hierarchy of a party or a parliamentary group (e.g., party leaders and front benchers) (Hobbs, 2016, McKnight, 2015, Quinn, 2012). Research undertaken rarely distinguishes between communication on behalf of the politician and communication done by the politician. Most investigations failed to

consider how their staffers shaped their political communication strategies (see Vos, 2016, Egeberg et al., 2013, Gershon, 2012, Jackson and Lilleker, 2011). This study explores how mediatisation and professionalisation impact political communication on behalf of parliamentarians in Western democracies, using Scotland as a case study.

A case study offers the opportunity to get an insight into this phenomenon and to identify patterns and variables influencing parliamentary assistants as communication officers of MSPs and Scottish MPs. Scotland can be classified as a typical case. Its patterns of professionalisation and mediatisation are similar to those of other regions and countries in Western Europe (see Downs, 2012, Schlesinger et al., 2001). Since personalisation plays a vital role in those trends, Scotland offers a unique opportunity to study the impact of different mandate types (list and constituency mandates) associated with the Scottish electoral system (MMP) on political communication processes. Although the literature suggests that those mandates influence the degree of personalisation of political communication (see Gschwend and Zittel, 2015, Pachón and Shugart, 2010), it is unclear whether this also impacts parliamentary assistants' approach to shaping and delivering political communication for their MPs.

Scotland is to be classified as a typical case (for further information on classifying cases, see also Bryman, 2012, Gerring, 2007). In this case, PAs from various backgrounds are included in the sample, and considering its electoral system, Scotland certainly provides exceptional conditions for conducting this study. According to George and Bennett (2005), the single case study is considered a "building block" case: It aims to study the involvement of PAs in political communication on behalf of parliamentarians in a professionalised and mediatised political environment. By utilising a single case study, it contributes to discussions within the scientific community by providing findings on the role of an actor widely ignored in the literature.

The selection of Scotland as a case study addresses the issue of transferability of the findings of this study (which is linked to Tracy's quality criterion on *Resonance*, which is discussed in Chapter 7.6.4). Analysing the Scottish case of parliamentary assistants influencing the political communication of MSPs provides findings that could be applicable in other cases, considering that Scotland is a rather typical case among Western democracies. However, it also needs to be considered that Scotland is a relatively small nation-state, which may impact how media and political networks interact. The workings of parliamentary assistants, who may operate as brokers between

those two networks, could be influenced by it. During fieldwork and preliminary talks, it became apparent that some actors were part of overlapping personal and professional networks (e.g., by knowing journalists personally, they could contact or develop relationships with staff members of other parliamentary offices). Considering that Scotland's public and political sphere is relatively small, those aspects may have an impact and need to be considered during the analysis.

7.6 Tracy's "big-tent" criteria: suitability of expert interviews and guiding principles of this research project

7.6.1 The "big-tent" criteria

According to Tracy (2010), qualitative research ensures high quality if the following criteria are met: The project should ensure *rich rigor* and be characterised by "a rich complexity of abundance" (ibid., p. 841). *Sincerity* and *Credibility* should be considered to provide high-quality results in qualitative research. *Sincerity* asks the research to be self-reflective, pursuing a transparent and honest approach. *Credibility* must be met through "trustworthiness, verisimilitude, and plausibility of the research findings" (ibid., p. 842). According to Tracy (2010), *Significant Contribution* and *Resonance* are two other aspects that need to be considered. *Significant Contribution* refers to the significance of the study in a broader sense. This is not limited to the contribution to scientific or academic discussion but also to methodological, theoretical and practical relevance.

Resonance measures to what extent the research can " meaningfully reverberate and affect an audience" (ibid., p. 844). The determining criteria are high transferability and the possibility of drawing naturalistic generalisations. Tracy also considers *Ethical Considerations* and *Meaningful Coherence* in her quality assessment of qualitative research. Ethics are not meant to be limited to how the data is gathered but should also include cultural, situational, relational and exiting considerations. *Meaningful coherence* is achieved if a research project "(a) achieve[s] [its] stated purpose; (b) accomplish what they espouse to be about; (c) use methods and representation practices that partner well with espoused theories and paradigms; and (d) attentively interconnect literature reviewed with research foci, methods, and findings" (ibid., p. 848). The final criterion is *Worthy Topic*. Research pursuing a worthy topic "are interesting and point

out surprises"; those topics can easily "grow from timely societal or personal events" (ibid., p. 840), but should not be chosen out of opportunism or convenience.

7.6.2 *Rich Rigor*

To address this criterion, the used data, theories, procedures and contexts of the undertaken study should be detailed, complex and nuanced; it should also be reasonable and appropriate (see Tracy, 2010). Although the research topic may be a potential barrier for recruiting participants in all the discussed methods, it provides several advantages, making it easier to access data and more likely to create a rich dataset. Compared to ethnographies, expert interviews are less time-consuming for individual interviewees and less intrusive (see also Lancaster, 2017, Bogner et al., 2014, Bryman, 2012), which makes it more likely that interview requests get positive responses to requests to participate in this research project. It also allows data collection in a broader range of settings, while – caused by time constraints – ethnographies would limit the fieldwork to very few settings.

Focus groups and group interviews would be similarly problematic, given that they require interviewees to be available at a specific time, while expert interviews may allow more flexibility. Another aspect is the sensitivity of the topic. It could become an additional obstacle for participants in a group interview to share their views and experiences in front of peers. Confidentiality would be very difficult to maintain under those circumstances, and the accessibility subsequently makes it more challenging to collect rich data to address the criterion of *Rich Rigor*.

Rich rigor, primarily through sampling, is a central criterion of quality for qualitative research (Tracy, 2010). To meet this criterion, the sampling was aimed to be as diverse as possible by including a large variety of possible perspectives in the research process. Additionally, (former and current) parliamentarians have been interviewed on the involvement of parliamentary assistants in political communication on their behalf. They provided a different perspective on the role of their employees while supporting this study in understanding how they and their offices are constructing communication. Furthermore, staff members of PPGs were also included. During the initial data collection stage and preliminary talks, I was made aware that those staff members assist MPs and MSPs in their communication efforts. Those staff members have also been

interviewed to evaluate the extent of their contributions to the communication process of parliamentarians' offices.

While including parliamentarians and PPG staff members has already diversified the sample and addressed the need for nuance and context, the sampling of interviewed staff members from MSPs and MPs was also aimed to be as diverse as possible. Although access to interviewees is difficult, as already explained, it was aimed to consider parliamentary assistants from MSPs with diverse regional affiliations, party backgrounds, ages and genders, seniority, ranks in the hierarchies of parliamentary groups and mandate types. The selection criteria were purposefully chosen:

7.6.2.1 Mandate Type

Given the outlined research question, it is imperative to consider the different types of mandates occupied by MSPs (list and constituency mandates) and MPs (constituency mandates). Previous research indicates that the type of mandate the incumbent holds significantly impacts the political campaigns and the political communication undertaken by the parliamentarian. Constituency parliamentarians are incentivised to personalise their campaigns (see, e.g., Gschwend and Zittel, 2015, Carey and Shugart, 1995) and even distance themselves from their party to some extent (see Vivyan and Wagner, 2015). In contrast, list MSPs may be incentivised to align more to their party stance to cultivate a party vote in an upcoming election (see Nemoto and Shugart, 2013, Pachón and Shugart, 2010, Carey and Shugart, 1995). Although it is unclear whether and to what extent the differentiation between list and constituency M(S)Ps plays a role in political communication, the possibility of a significant impact was considered during the sampling. Consequently, PAs from both types of MSPs are included.

The inclusion of three types of mandates – namely list and constituency MSPs as well as MPs – provides several advantages. Twenty-two of the interviewed PAs worked for more than one parliamentarian, considering all their experiences in different contexts, which provides a unique opportunity for identifying similarities and differences in how the mandate of their employees shapes their practices and workplaces. It allows interviewees to draw comparisons between their current and former employers and identify differences, if there are any. However, it needs to be added that trying to identify potential interview candidates has been challenging, even without attempting to look for interviewees who have worked for several parliamentarians (MPs, MSPs, or both).

Furthermore, there is a significant risk that experiences with several MPs and MSPs might be confused by interviewees, resulting in misleading accounts (Gerson and Damaske, 2021, Clark et al., 2021). Adding to this, it has proven to be even more challenging to find parliamentarians willing to get interviewed; as a consequence, there were only six interviews with legislators (see Section 7.6.3). However, in sum, the relatively large number of interviewees allowed them to triangulate the different accounts of working practices and arrangements – in some cases, interviewees experienced the same employer at the same time. Furthermore, interviews were using thematic clusters of questions or questions on presumably intense experiences (e.g., conflicts, the decision to leave their working arrangements or their involvement in campaigns), which assisted interviewees to recall the situation (in line with Gerson and Damaske, 2021, p. 87-88).

7.6.2.2 Regional Affiliation

Selected PAs are located all over Scotland in urban, suburban and rural areas. The sampling also includes PAs who work for M(S)Ps representing constituency areas on islands. Although no research has been done on the impact of location and the working procedures of parliamentary communication officers, the possibility that working experiences and communication processes might be influenced by location should at least be considered. Research on the agenda-setting power of political elites, for example, indicated that the specific form of the media landscape (see Semetko et al., 2000) impacts whether and to what extent political communication managers can influence news coverage. The media landscape in Scotland, especially on the local level, is rather diverse (see McNair, 2006), which might impact the working procedures in political communication processes.

7.6.2.3 Party Affiliation

The literature suggests that the different degrees of influence of the party leadership might have an impact on how candidates and parliamentarians conduct political campaigns and political communication (see, e.g., Poguntke and Webb, 2005, Carey and Shugart, 1995). Furthermore, the extent of sources provided by the party (see Johnston and Pattie, 2007, Johnston et al., 1999), as well as the degree of professionalisation of political campaigns and political communication, vary from party to party (see Tenscher et al., 2016, Gibson and Römmele, 2009). Because there have been no studies on those matters in Scotland and since the impact of differences of party

provisions on communication managers of parliamentarians inside and outside the purdah period are unknown, the sample reflects the diversity of parties in the Scottish parliament to avoid missing party-related differences.

7.6.2.4 Age and Gender of Parliamentarians

The literature suggests that the age and gender of MPs might influence the way the media treats them and shape how they decide on specific issues. Several studies indicate that the age and the gender of the parliamentarian influence their decision on whether or to what extent a social media strategy is employed (see Jackson and Lilleker, 2011). Gender, as recent research indicates, might have an impact on the process of appointing list and constituency candidates and how news media cover the individual parliamentarian (see Hooghe et al., 2015). Both might influence the decision-making process on which and how the media strategy of individual parliamentary assistants is applied. To avoid excluding valuable perspectives of parliamentary assistants, which might be affected by differences of gender and age by their employers, parliamentary assistants from MSPs and Scottish MPs of all genders and age groups have been interviewed.

7.6.2.5 Power Hierarchies

The sample considers the different power hierarchies within the parliamentary groups. It aims to include interviews with parliamentary assistants from front and backbenchers as well as staff members of PPGs. The different positions of parliamentarians within the hierarchy of their PPGs significantly impact their perceived newsworthiness by journalists (see Boumans et al., 2013, Hopmann et al., 2011). Although incumbents of comparatively high-ranked roles tend to receive more attention from news media, parliamentarians with a lower position have several options to increase their newsworthiness (see Vos, 2016), which may also be reflected in the approach of their communication officers.

7.6.2.6 Seniority

Seniority in the context of this study is understood as the time the interviewee, or his employer, has spent in their role as PA (or as parliamentarian). The literature has already confirmed that seniority impacts political actors (see, e.g., Taylor, 2019, De Winter and Baudewyns, 2015, Elmelund-Præstekær et al., 2011, Jackson and Lilleker, 2011, Shomer, 2009). Consequently, the sampling considered the seniority of interviewees for

this study. Furthermore, questions addressing seniority were asked during the interviews to explore how this characteristic influences political communication on behalf of parliamentarians.

7.6.3 *Sincerity and Credibility*

Tracy stipulates that a high degree of sincerity is characterised by "self-reflexivity about subjective values, biases, and inclinations of the researcher" and "transparency about the methods and challenges" (2010, p. 840). The study addresses those aspects by outlining the utilised research methods and discussing potential alternatives. Challenges occurred throughout the fieldwork, which will be discussed in Chapter 11.2, considering the limitations of this study and opportunities for future studies. Self-reflexivity is addressed by outlining the philosophical assumptions that framed the research process, which is discussed in Chapter 7.3. Even though it cannot be guaranteed that the influence of "values, biases and inclinations" are excluded, they are critically reflected upon during the research process and the analysis.

According to Tracy, *Credibility* requires the study to provide "thick description, concrete detail, explication of tacit (nontextual) knowledge, and showing rather than telling [...] triangulation or crystallisation [...] multivocality [...] member reflections" (2010, p. 840). This mainly "refers to the trustworthiness, verisimilitude, and plausibility of the research findings" (2010, p. 842). The concept of data saturation is used to substantiate the quality of the sample further and to address those outlined criteria of *Credibility*, in addition to seeking critical distance from the information provided by interviewees. The exact sample size will not be determined in advance by determining the data saturation during the fieldwork. *Data saturation* is achieved as soon as the content of the data repeats itself, and no new content is to be expected by collecting further data (see Saunders et al., 2018). This concept is particularly suitable and will enhance the quality of this research project since it requires constant revision of the collected material to assess whether new information could be won by conducting further interviews. This also provides flexibility compared to setting a fixed number of interviews before the fieldwork starts (see Saunders et al., 2018, Fusch and Ness, 2015). To further reduce entrance barriers for potential interviewees, the sampling process will not be time-limited but primarily oriented on whether data saturation has been achieved.

The data collection started at the beginning of the summer recess of the Scottish Parliament on 30th June 2019. Overall, sixty interviews have been undertaken, with the last interview conducted on the 27th June 2022. The length of those interviews varied, ranging from 14 minutes to 124 minutes. Most interviews were conducted in 2019 (34 interviews), mainly with PAs working as parliamentary assistants at the time (97% of the interviews). In 2021 and 2022, interviews were mainly arranged with former parliamentary assistants (62% of the interviews). *Credibility* is achieved by including interviewees who have already left their roles since they have some distance towards their past activities and are less (politically) pressured by the embedment into a parliamentary office. The interviews at the later stage of the fieldwork were often longer than 60 minutes (58% of the interviews). They allowed for more detailed questions addressing some of the findings which had already emerged in earlier interviews.

The interviewed participants cover a wide range of backgrounds. Six of the sixty interviewees were parliamentarians, 16 worked for the parliamentary party, the party leadership, or at one of the party headquarters, and 48 were employed as parliamentary assistants (the categories can overlap). From the accounts of former and recent PAs, 78% referred to parliamentary offices of MSPs, while 22% referred to offices of MPs; from all interviewed PAs, 50% were working for parliamentarians with constituency offices located in Scottish cities. The majority of the interviewees were male (62%); of the interviewed PAs who had working experiences with MSPs, 68% were working with list MSPs at one point in time. From those interviewees with working experiences for list MSPs, accounts by interviewees covered all electoral regions, whereby the Highlands and Islands region and Central Scotland with three accounts each provided the smallest number of interviewees (at least four PAs per region represented all other

regions). All parties were represented in the sampling (see Figure 6).

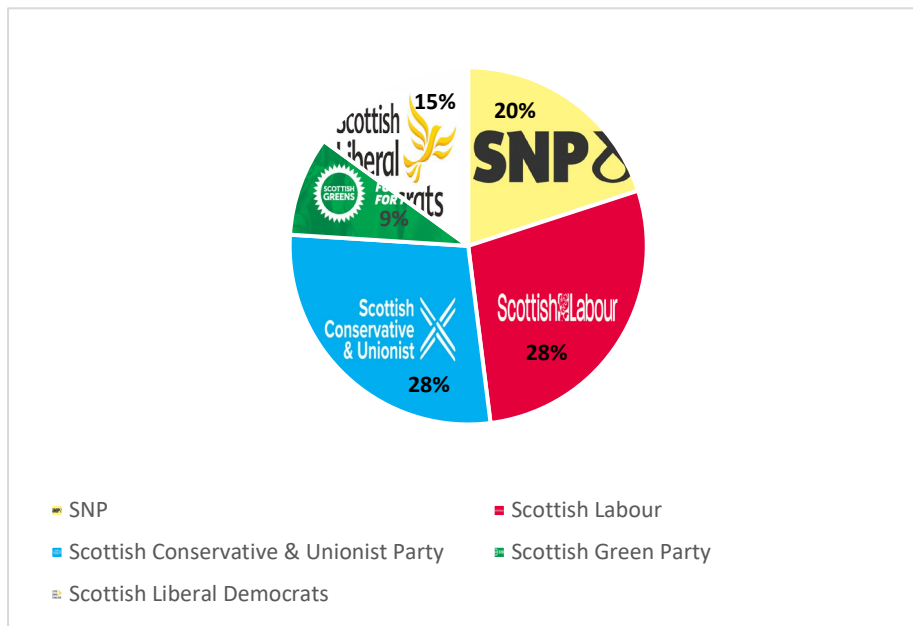


Figure 6 Party Affiliation of Interviewees

However, despite including former PAs in the sample, the challenges concerning their reflectiveness remain. The need for a critical distance is due to the fact that interviewees may intentionally or unintentionally provide content that omits, contradicts, or even misleads. Dorussen et al. (2005) discuss how this can be tackled: For one, they suggest that inter-subjectivity of specific information can indicate whether relevant experts accept the provided information as a factor. Second, they highlight that lead experts may have a greater insight into given phenomena (e.g., through their advanced experience) than other experts, which should also be considered. The two measures are addressed by including experts with different backgrounds (e.g., location, mandate type, seniority), different roles (i.e., PPG staff members, parliamentarians, staff members of parliamentarians), varying lengths of tenure (e.g., few months to several years) in addition to considering former and recent PAs and parliamentarians as interviewees in the sample.

Even though Dorussen et al. (2005) do not provide detailed measures on how to distinguish between experts and lead experts, their operationalisation mainly considers the experience of the expert in the particular role, which made him an expert in the context of the study. This study will utilise this approach by considering the experience of the expert in this role and similar roles held before. Additionally, the context of the question is considered by reflecting on whether a lead expert provides the answer.

Dorussen et al. (2005) highlight that the expertise of experts may vary depending on the subject matter. In this study, this is the case when analysing the accounts of interviewees who recently entered the role without having relevant experiences beforehand. They may be better equipped in their expertise of how their employer and the party have managed the entry into their role.

7.6.4 *Significant Contribution, Resonance and Worthy Topic*

Tracy (2010) explains that the criterion of *significant contribution* aims towards the question of which kind of contribution the study provides and how relevant this contribution may be. The study applied this criterion as a guiding principle throughout the research process. Tracy distinguishes different types of contributions: theoretical significant, methodological significant, heuristically significant, and practically significant research. While this research project does not apply a new but established methodology, it addresses the three remaining types of relevant contributions. Tracy describes the criterion of heuristic significance as fulfilled when "it develops curiosity in the reader and helps inspire new discoveries" (ibid., p. 846). This study explores an area that has not been researched yet. After presenting its findings, it will provide a range of suggestions for further research (see Chapter 11.3). Due to its character, this study intends to contribute to political communication debates by providing significant and novel findings which address this quality criterion. Tracy (2010) states that significant theoretical contributions would extend, build upon or criticise existing knowledge. This has been considered by analysing the findings through already established theories on mediatisation and professionalisation of political communication to either extend existing knowledge or to criticise it.

Practically significant research is characterised by addressing "*catalytic validity* refer[ing] to research that provides a political consciousness that catalyses cultural members to act [...] *tactical authenticity* refer[ing] to the ability of an inquiry to encourage researchers to train interested participants in political action [...] [*phronesis*] refer[ing] to analyses that enable practical wisdom and space for transformation" (ibid., p. 846).

This research project aims to address all three criteria of significant practical research. It has been illustrated in the literature review that there have been recent developments in professionalisation, personalisation and modernisation of political campaigns and

political communication (see, e.g., Boumans et al., 2013, Baxter and Marcella, 2012, Downs, 2012, Baxter et al., 2011, Langer, 2011, Strömbäck, 2009). However, the focus has primarily been on political campaigns, i.e., electoral campaigns; studies focusing on routine times are often not at the centre stage of academic debates. Furthermore, those studies did not consider parliamentary assistants even though a prominent role in the political communication of individual parliamentarians can be expected. The catalytic validity can be addressed by examining their role, given that those actors – while not elected – may significantly impact the image and activities of their employer. Creating awareness of unknown aspects of parliamentarians' work contributes to a better understanding of their activities, practices, and challenges. *Tactical authenticity* and *phronesis* are aimed to be enabled by actively providing findings to former interviewees and interested parties. Offices agreeing to participate in this study were offered a presentation of a summary of this study, also highlighting that any third party interested in those findings is free to join. Additionally, it is planned to utilise the findings of this research to create workshops and seminars for an interested, professional audience (e.g., future parliamentary assistants). Seminars and presentations could help "to enable practical wisdom and space for transformation" (ibid., p. 846, see also Gordon and Patterson, 2013 for application of significant contribution).

Tracy (2010) did not detail what Resonance means (see Bryman, 2012). However, she describes it as achieved "through aesthetic merit, evocative writing, and formal generalisations as well as transferability" (ibid., p. 844). While I have, of course, tried hard to write evocatively, thereby earning aesthetic merit, there is no question about the transferability of the project. The different factors mentioned in Chapter 7.6.2 on *rich rigor* aim to make it possible to identify and understand different impact factors shaping political communication on behalf of parliamentarians. By reflecting on the transferability of the gained insight from this research project to settings of political communication outside Scotland where parliamentary assistants are involved, further avenues of research will be outlined in Chapter 11.3.

Tracy has described the worthiness of a topic as "relevant, timely, significant, interesting, or evocative" (ibid., p. 840). As described in the literature review, there is a significant lack of knowledge on how political communication processes are constructed on the constituency level. It is also not known to what extent parliamentary assistants shape political communication, even though it is known that they influence

other aspects of the parliamentarian's political work (see, e.g., Tenscher et al., 2016, Egeberg et al., 2013). The topic is also timely, given that there has been a recent trend towards modernisation and professionalisation, which may impact the degree of influence parliamentary assistants may have over their employers (see, e.g., Heppell, 2013, Strömbäck, 2009).

7.6.5 *Meaningful coherence and ethical considerations*

Meaningful coherence is provided if three requirements are fulfilled (Tracy, 2010): It needs to "achieve [...] stated purpose; (b) accomplish what [it] espouse[s] to be about; (c) use[s] methods and representation practices that partner well with espoused theories and paradigms; and (d) attentively interconnect[s] literature reviewed with research foci, methods, and findings" (ibid., p. 848). Those criteria have been used as a benchmark throughout the research process. Tracy highlighted that critical reflection on whether the stated research goals have been successfully achieved needs to match the underpinning research philosophy. The research must be able to connect itself with the existing literature and provide an answer to the given question. The outlined methods – as initially stated in this chapter – are suitable for providing appropriate answers. The research questions themselves are derived from the existing literature in order to address identified gaps of knowledge (see Chapters 5.3 and 7.1).

According to Tracy (2010), the consideration of ethics requires the implementation of "procedural, situational, relational, and exiting ethics" (ibid., p. 847). Procedural ethics relate to ethical standards established by institutions and professional organisations for conducting research. Undergoing the University of Stirling's ethical approval procedure addresses the need to comply with procedural standards for this research project. The successful completion of this procedure and certification by the General University Ethics Panel demonstrate that this project adheres to the outlined institutional requirements and ethical research standards (Ethical Approval, p. 3). Part of this process was demonstrating that interviewees were informed about this research's purposes and potential risks. This also entails that anonymity and confidentiality of the interviews are offered when requested. Situational ethics addresses contextual and situational ethical considerations beyond procedural requirements. Tracy describes that this aspect is addressed through reflection during the fieldwork and consideration of the adverse impact of the research project on participants. Relational ethics refers to the critical

reflection on the actions of the researcher affecting the relationship between researcher and participant. It primarily addresses the necessity of "reciprocity with participants and do[es] not co-opt others" (ibid., p. 847); it requires building up trust and respecting the dignity of participants. Exiting ethics refers to the researcher's conduct when "leaving the scene" (ibid., p. 847), including how information won through the research project is to be shared.

The topics discussed during the interviews covered a wide range of issues. Those topics include, among others, the relationship between PAs and between them and their parliamentarian, the party's influence on the communication strategy and the management of media relations. Parts of the information might be considered confidential and harm the interviewee, colleagues or the parliamentarian's party if the information enters the public domain. To avoid harm to the participants and indirectly involved third parties, several measures were applied to minimise ethical problems and ensure the quality of this research project. Bryman (2012) identifies four main principles to be considered in research projects, which will be briefly discussed in the context of this study: informed consent, invasion of privacy, deception and harm to participants. Additionally, keeping in mind Tracy's "exiting ethics", the point "sharing information" has been added.

7.6.5.1 Informed Consent

Informed consent needs to be ensured. Participants were informed in advance of the purpose of this study and how it is conducted. The week before the interview, participants received the information sheet outlining all relevant aspects of the research project. At the beginning of each interview, interviewees were encouraged to ask questions and a summary of the research project was provided to them. In conclusion, interviewees had the time to read and process this information and – if necessary – reconsider their participation in this research project.

Participants had the option to withdraw from this study at any point without having to provide a reason. If they had withdrawn after the interview, all recordings, notes and transcripts from this interview would have been deleted. Interviewees received the researcher's contact details before the interview in case questions on the project arose. Questions and requests from interviewees (e.g., how and when the interviews are

conducted) have been answered in a timely manner. However, none of the interviewees withdrew from the study.

Informing the participants about their rights and the study's background addresses three of the four ethical considerations Tracy is proposing. Acquiring informed consent helps to establish a relationship of mutual trust between the participant and researcher (relational ethics). It is also a standard norm in academic research (see Bryman, 2012), and it is required by universities and research institutions (procedural ethics). Acquiring informed consent by ensuring the interviewee is aware of potential implications also addresses situational ethics. The venue where the interview takes place (e.g., their parliamentary office) and the interviewees' political background could have caused some topics to be perceived as sensitive, so raising awareness before conducting this interview is also of contextual importance.

7.6.5.2 Invasion of Privacy

Private matters such as co-worker relationships were addressed during the interviews since the given information might provide insight into the dynamics of their working environment. It is, therefore, imperative to anonymise and provide confidentiality as much as possible. The transcription services asked to transcribe the data guaranteed confidentiality over the content of the recording transcriptions. The data is saved in a separate, encrypted, password-protected hard drive. The thesis will not display information that could expose the participants' identities. Instead of names, letters and numbers are going to be used.

Considering invasion of privacy in the ethical considerations of this research project addresses situational, procedural and relational ethics. The avoidance of the invasion of privacy is usually required as a standard for good research conduct from research institutions (procedural ethics). It also helps to establish a relationship of trust and respect between the researcher and the participant (see, e.g., Bryman, 2012, Saunders et al., 2009). Developing a trustful relationship between interviewee and interviewer is particularly important given that dynamics between participants, co-workers, and employers are the subject of the interviews (relational ethics). The context of these interviews, the potential sensitivity of the topics addressed, and the potential repercussions of exposing information about co-workers and employers illustrate the importance of upholding situational ethics. Parliamentary assistants work

comparatively close in an office with a small team. Discussing personal aspects of team-internal relationships may impact those relationships if the matter of discussion is known to other parts of the team.

7.6.5.3 Deception

Although parliamentary assistants are usually graduates and should, therefore, be able to understand the background of this project, several measures were put in place to avoid deception. Firstly, the information on the participant information sheet is complete, and contact details – in case additional questions occur – were provided. Secondly, the interview date, time, and venue were confirmed on the interview day to avoid confusion and misunderstandings. Interviewees were also asked to confirm that they received the participant information sheet.

Before the scheduled interview, the participants received a short overview of key aspects of this research project and relevant ethical implications and were allowed to ask questions. After that, they were asked to provide a signature to confirm that they voluntarily participated in this research project and that they understood the information on the research project provided by the interviewer. In cases where interviews were conducted remotely, the confirmation from the interviewee was recorded. After the interview, participants were debriefed where possible. Interviewees were also asked if the interview went well and encouraged to contact the researcher if they had further questions. The approach complies with the principles of avoiding deception and obtaining informed consent from the participants. It was also ensured that interviewees understood that the researcher was grateful for their participation. Those outlined points in the conduct of the data collection were also implemented to help ease access to parliamentary settings for future studies (see Owen, 2011).

Avoiding deceptive acts primarily addresses relational ethics and procedural ethics. Research institutions and professional research bodies highlight the relevance of avoiding deception in their Codes of Conduct and see it as a standard of good research practice (see Bryman, 2012). It also helps to establish mutual trust and a respectful relationship with participants, which is the foundation of relational ethics. To some degree, contextual ethics are also addressed since non-compliance would make – given the topic's sensitivity – future research even more difficult since access to this group of participants may become more problematic.

7.6.5.4 Harm to Participants

There may be several potentially negative consequences of participating in this research project. Interviewees might be sanctioned by their colleagues and employers for revealing information on working relationships, procedures and structures within the office or the parliamentary group. Besides those short- and medium-term consequences, long-term consequences might occur: Parliamentary assistants are quite often part of the party hierarchy and might be potentially selected to stand as candidates in future elections (see Cheng and Tavits, 2011, Rallings et al., 2010). In some cases, this might be the interviewees' career aspiration (see Shomer, 2009, Recchi, 1999).

The measures established to avoid harm to the participants of this research project overlap with the procedures set up to avoid deception and invasion of privacy and ensure informed consent. Participants are provided with all necessary information on this research project before, during and after the interview. They were allowed to withdraw at any stage, and they were free to ask questions if necessary. Additionally, employed transcribers guaranteed the confidentiality of the transcribed material. Anonymity and confidentiality are ensured by using pseudonyms, anonymisation of transcripts and recordings, and the encryption of all primary sources obtained during the interview.

Minimising the likelihood that participants are harmed addresses relational and procedural ethics and is contextually significant and generally of primary concern. Like avoiding deception and intrusion of privacy and acquiring informed consent, avoiding harm to participants is a crucial requirement and standard norm of good academic practice and is required by research institutions to make the research project eligible for ethical approval (procedural ethics). It also helps to establish a relationship of trust towards participants, that concern for their well-being is demonstrated and actively considered in the research process (see, e.g., Bryman, 2012, May, 2005). Contextual ethical considerations also play a role: Politicians rely on social networks. This makes them particularly vulnerable when the confidentiality of the information is not ensured. However, physical harm is most likely not a danger in the context of this research.

7.6.5.5 Sharing information

Tracy (2010, but also Gordon and Patterson, 2013, Fine et al., 2000) highlighted the importance of ethical considerations when leaving the fieldwork and finishing the research project. Participants have been offered that the results of this project be shared

with them. This will be done by making the thesis available to them and by providing summaries and presentations. In addition, participants will be offered presentations or summaries that are open to anyone interested, including their parties and co-workers. During the fieldwork, contact has been established to support units of the respective parties in the Scottish parliament, which have internal mailing lists. After finishing the research, it is planned to contact those units to spread the offer of attending a presentation or getting access to this thesis. It is also planned to develop seminars and workshops based on the research findings and provide access to interested individuals and organisations, particularly those who participated in this research project.

8 Findings I – Parliamentarians' Communication Approaches: The Choice between being in Control and outsourcing Control to Parliamentary Assistants

There is no "typical day" for communication officers¹⁴ or a "typical office structure". This became apparent from the first interviews conducted for this study. One of the key challenges was identifying the right people within the offices of contacted parliamentarians rather than finding participants willing to be interviewed. During the initial contact by phone, requests for interviews were frequently declined because the office did not have a designated "communication officer". However, after explaining that the research interest would be on parliamentary assistants involved in communication matters, I was directed to staff members who would be involved in communication tasks. While some PAs were designated communication officers, others did not identify as such since communication-related duties were just one part among a range of regular activities they were expected to perform. Interviewee A puts this as follows:

"[E]very MSP works differently, and because it is a small office and a small group, you need to be reasonably comfortable, that [...] you can work well with the people you are working with." (Interviewee A, Interview on 26/08/2019)

The variation of working arrangements from office to office has been a common theme throughout the interviews, not just through comparing the different interviews but also when participants explained that they were employed in a similar position for two offices concurrently. Very little difference was found among parliamentary offices of list and constituency MSPs or MPs. Interviewee B, who has been working for two list MSPs of the same party and was assigned to undertake communication tasks in both offices, illustrates the variation in the structure of the two offices as follows:

"ZA's¹⁵ office is a lot more [hierarchical] [...] with ZA at the top, his office manager and then me and [caseworker] sort of down here [...] YA's approach is, you know, you can occasionally get a [...] too many cooks type approach for this, me, YA and these other two staffers also trying to decide the direction to go in or

¹⁴ As previously stated in the introduction: For the purposes of this research project, any staff member who is spending a substantial part of his/her work time on communication related task is referred to as "communication officer".

¹⁵ To anonymise the sources of these quotes, names of parliamentarians as well as communication officers are replaced by either a randomly chosen capital letter (one letter for interviewees and two letters for MSPs/MPs) or a signpost indicating their position (e.g. [parliamentarian] or [caseworker]).

something and that can take time that we don't necessarily have. Which isn't an issue in ZA's office." (Interviewee B, Interview on 04/09/2019)

The relationship between the communication officer and the parliamentarian is, consequently, different from office to office. This is mirrored in relationship management, the organisation of parliamentary offices, and the arrangements around the hiring practices of parliamentarians. Interviewee C, a former politician in a senior position within the party leadership, explained the situation by indicating that trust and not necessarily the professional background may be decisive for offering somebody employment.

"[The] parliament is not directly involved in the recruitment; that's solely down to the MSP. And I would say, as a consequence, there is a very varied pattern of recruitment practices, and a lot of it is quite unprofessional, and a lot of it is also rooted in safety and security of the politics of who you're employing rather than it being a meritocracy." (Interviewee C, Interview on 02/10/2019)

While the offices seem to have idiosyncratic structures and working arrangements, they face similar challenges and factors shaping their communication approach.

The chapter will identify factors and principles governing the relationship and interplay between parliamentarians and their communication officers and how they influence communication output. It proposes that this relationship is best described as shaped by the principal-agent problem (see also Chapter 6.2). For this research project, the principal-agent problem is defined as a potential misalignment between the parliamentarian's and PA's interests. The principal – the parliamentarian – has the primary interest of getting re-elected, while the interests of their communication officer – the agent – are somewhat ambiguous. Interviewees noted that the tenure of the communication officers is usually time-limited and rarely covers the whole term of the parliamentarian. The motivational driver of PAs varies and can range from acquiring experiences to working in the private sector, e.g., in public relations or starting a political career on their own. Based on the analysis, this chapter will provide innovative models that capture the recruitment process, the controlling approaches towards PAs' communication-related work by MPs/MSPs, and the professionalisation process throughout the tenure of parliamentary assistants. All three will help to conceptualise the circumstances in which political communication is planned, organised and created.

The first section of the chapter explores the relationship between parliamentarians and communication officers. It illustrates how the principal-agent problem shapes the

recruitment of PAs, the setup of communication arrangements, and which content is communicated to the outside world. This section will provide a model that conceptualises the hiring process and captures the importance of trustworthiness compared to the professional background of candidates applying to work in a parliamentary office (see Figure 7). The signing-off process leading to the release of communication output will also be discussed. The need for the parliamentarian's consent to change the status quo of arrangements in a parliamentary office makes the MP/MSP a veto player controlling the setting in which political communication is created. In this context, releasing a particular communication output constitutes a change towards the default of not communicating with external stakeholders. While usually not creating the output, the parliamentarian must consent either explicitly by signing off the individual piece or by agreeing to procedural alternatives leading to releasing the communication output. The different approaches by parliamentarians towards controlling the communication output are captured by a model illustrating how the flow of information from the communication officer to external stakeholders is regulated through the sign-off process (see Figure 8).

Finally, the last section of the chapter discusses the degree of autonomy of the communication officer based on how the relationship between the communication officer and the parliamentarian is managed and how the signing-off process is set up. In particular, it focuses on the degree of control the communication officer and parliamentarian exert over the external communication outputs. In this context, it will introduce a model conceptualising the professionalisation process of PAs. This model will capture how acquiring trust and expertise increases their autonomy over time but also creates incentives for the departure of PAs from their roles as communication officers (see Figure 9).

The findings of this chapter will provide critical counterpoints to the ongoing scholarly debates on mediatisation and professionalisation of political communication. In the context of parliamentary offices' political communication, mediatisation and professionalisation are clearly limited. Trust is the key determinant shaping the communication officer's role and the degree of control exercised by the MP and MSP over the political communication process. Looking at the accounts of interviewees across different mandate types, there is very little difference between the findings identified from interviews with PAs from constituency and list MSPs or MPs. The

communication officers' professional qualities, i.e. their expertise and understanding of media stakeholders' expectations, are of limited relevance in most cases. The chapter will also show that the circumstances of how PAs professionalise create barriers to consistently professionalised communication and media management.

8.1 The Role of the Communication Officer and the Significance of Trust

8.1.1 The Communication Officer, a "jack of all trades"

The role of the communication officer in parliamentarians' offices is neither clearly defined nor does it exist as a commonly acknowledged role in every parliamentarian's office. Instead, various arrangements cover communication-related tasks mirroring the idiosyncrasy of structure and working arrangements in the offices of MPs and MSPs. The diversity of how communication is organised and managed needs to be discussed before exploring and analysing the relationship between communication officers and parliamentarians. This section first outlines the characteristics of the communication officer as a role within the parliamentarian's office. It then examines which factors shape this role and its relationship to the MP/MSP utilising the "principal-agent problem".

The role of the communication officer varies between offices, irrespective of the mandate of the parliamentarian (list or constituency MSP or MP). These variations concern the duties associated with the position and the reporting relationships, which media platforms the person is responsible for, and how much time is allocated to address the assigned tasks. Employees working for an MSP's or MP's office as communication officers are usually employed full-time or part-time. Full-time staff members usually described their role as "jack of all trades" (see, e.g., Interviewee S, Interview on 26/11/2021) who would be involved in a range of tasks that are not communication-related:

"I am office manager and political assistant [...]. That [...] just means everything [...] casework is the thing I do the least, but even that, I probably do bits and bobs from. [...] [Communication-related work] can range from probably a few hours a week if it's a quiet week, or maybe up to 50 or 60% of my week. Something like that." (Interviewee D, Interview on 02/09/2019)

The tasks assigned to PAs and their conduct vary "from office to office" (Interviewee A, Interview on 26/08/2019). Some interviewees confirmed that communication and campaigning-related tasks are their primary concerns and take up almost all their time. However, none of the full-time employed communication officers described their role

as exclusively focused on communication but instead function as "jack of all trades" (see, e.g., Interviewee S, Interview on 26/11/2021):

"[M]y title in the office is a communications manager [...] my role in the office consists of promoting XA's work; however, I also do quite a lot of casework [...] I [...] got my finger in a lot of pies in this office; sometimes it involves research too [...]." (Interviewee F, Interview on 13/09/2019)

The tasks and duties of part-time communication officers are equally diverse. However, some show more specialisation and describe their job as almost exclusively concerned with communication-related tasks. In several instances, those part-time staff members have been working for two different parliamentarians (MPs and MSPs) on a part-time contract simultaneously with a similar role. Those arrangements, being part-time employed in two different offices, are not unusual (25% of the interviewed PAs in 2019). While the range of duties for those part-timers in the two offices displayed similar features, there are also differences concerning their duties and the office structure in which they are embedded. The two different posts are usually not linked; the duties and responsibilities of the communication officers were separated:

"[...] the different roles, [...] entail different things. [...] I do all of [...] his parliamentary emails; I organise his diary. I respond to event requests; I organise events that he's going to host [...] I give him briefings for when he goes into debates. And then for VA, [...] I will do his social media content, his press releases which go both nationally and locally [...]." (Interviewee G, Interview on 22/08/2019)

However, there has been an instance in which an interviewee explained that synergy effects were intended through employment by two different parliamentarians. In other cases, the positive side effects of being employed in two offices were found to be noticeable but were not intended when the employment started. Some roles may have changed over time; for example, due to workload and reorganisation of a parliamentarian's office, staff members may be assigned to a communication-related task that was initially not part of their duties. An interviewee has described the reasons for the evolution of interviewee H's role as follows:

"It's now my colleague that's done it, [...] H started doing it as a researcher, and I took it all in, mainly to do with staffing issues; I've now gone back to doing a wee bit more casework, so I've now kind of shed the press release responsibility [...]." (Interviewee F, Interview on 23/08/2019)

In summary, the role of communication officer is best understood as an umbrella term for PAs responsible for communication-related tasks undertaken by one or two

individuals employed by MPs, MSPs or both. While there is usually a concentration and clear designation of communication-related tasks, it is not unusual for offices to have ad hoc arrangements in place or to be flexible in the organisation of communication tasks. This flexibility usually extends to other non-communication-related assignments, so staff members are not dedicating their whole working time to communication duties. Interviewees emphasised that the ability of the communication officer to voice the parliamentarian authentically is crucial for fulfilling those duties sufficiently. The parliamentarian's trust in the communication officer's ability to authentically represent their views in the communication output is equally important. Trust was one of the key recurring themes in all interviews when participants were asked about the working relationship between the parliamentarian and the communication officer.

8.1.2 Controlling of Principal-Agent Problems in the Context of the Relationship between Parliamentarian and Communication Officer

8.1.2.1 The Recruitment Process as a Mechanism to Minimise Principal-Agent Problems

Interviewees highlighted the importance of parliamentarians' trust in the relationship between MPs and MSPs and their communication officers. A lack of confidence would create tensions and conflicts in the workplace and undermine the communication officer's effectiveness and efficiency (see Interviewee S, Interview on 26/11/2021). This point has been reinforced by another communication officer who stated that employment with some of the other MPs or MSPs of her party would not be an option.

"You choose to work for an organisation usually because you [...] agree with what they're saying, and you agree with the work that they're doing. When you choose to work for a particular MSP, you have the same thinking behind that. There's certain MSPs on this corridor that I wouldn't work for." (Interviewee K, Interview on 27/08/2019)

The key feature of the *hidden characteristics* problem is the potential incompatibility of the qualities of a candidate who ought to fulfil the role of an agent – in this case, as a communication officer – with the expectations of the parliamentarian towards the output their communication officers have to produce: to voice their employer authentically. The misalignment of views and values can impede this ability and is, therefore, one of the *hidden characteristics* that should be avoided. This misalignment also addresses the problem of *hidden intentions*: If both parliamentarian and communication officer have misaligned goals or a flawed understanding of each other,

miscommunication and conflicts may occur. The misalignment would make it more difficult for the agent (the PA) to fulfil the expectations and intentions of the principal (the MP or MSP) regarding how to voice and position the parliamentarian authentically. Suppose there is an alignment of political values, goals and preferences. In that case, it also increases the likelihood of the individual being willing to complete additional tasks which are not part of his contractual responsibilities:

"I would describe it as a compromise [...] I can have a good speech [...] written for me by a member of staff who will also then go and knock doors three times a week, or I can have a brilliant speech with no additional volunteer capacity from that member of staff, which one is more likely to get me re-elected [...] the press release only has to be good enough, but it's your man-hours and energy that ultimately return election results." (Interviewee C, Interview on 02/10/2019)

Even though several interviewees have stated that this is outside their job-related duties, the involvement in party campaigning manifests in various ways for PAs of MPs as well as for those working for MSPs. As already noted, the involvement in campaigning activities before employment as a staff member of a parliamentarian is rather typical, and being engaged in party-related dealings outside the worktime is not unusual either. Interviewee G confirmed that she was involved in campaigning for a by-election a few days before the interview. The participant explained that, especially for small parties losing or gaining additional seats, it could be politically and financially problematic since a negative outcome may put further constraints on their already limited resources. However, during the interviews, it also became apparent that some communication officers rarely participate in campaigning or party-political activities. This indicates that involvement in party politics and campaigning matters is a common characteristic but not a generalisable job entry requirement.

"I mean, the only time I really done that is, oh, what was it again, I think it was a...? Oh, yeah, it was the European election which took place quite recently." (Interviewee L, Interview on 19/08/2019)

The financial limitations in the recruitment process further diminish the relevance of professional experience or training when applying for the role of communication officer, as illustrated by one participant:

"[Y]ou have to bear in mind that you can look at the MSP budgets. I think MSPs have something like 70, 80 grand a year to spend on staff [...] [a]nd you look at

the parliamentary pay scales.¹⁶ [...] [E]very MSP, essentially, need a head of office and their salaries [are] about 30, 35K. That takes up half of it. So MSPs are [...] very confined in [...] hiring decisions they can make." (Interviewee J, Interview on 27/08/2019)

While Interviewee J primarily referred to the situation of PAs working for MSPs, there was little indication from interviewees who worked for MPs that their situation differed. The duties of communication officers vary and include – as already illustrated – tasks that are not communication-related. The flexibility in the organisation of offices and the designation of responsibilities do not require that potential employees be specialised. Besides, parties and press units organise political communication nationally, limiting individual parliamentarians' need for political communication efforts.¹⁷ Consequently, candidates applying for the communication officer or any PA role should be willing and able to act as a "jack of all trades" who are expected to produce "good enough" quality communication outputs. However, resonating with his employer's political values and goals is equally important. They ensure that successful applicants are willing to contribute to the electoral success of their employer (MPs and MSPs alike) beyond their contracted duties and can acquire an insight into their employer, putting them in a position to voice their parliamentarians' views authentically. Interviewee S (Interview on 26/11/2021) compared the relationship between communication officer and parliamentarian with marriage. The former can finish a sentence or a thought for the latter – like, as he puts it, in a relationship of an old couple.

Interviewees somewhat varied in their understanding of the purpose of their role as communication officers regarding its value for re-election. Some saw their role as communicating the parliamentarian's activities and the re-election as a by-product of successfully fulfilling their (legislative and local) responsibilities as elected representatives (see, e.g., Interviewee CA). Others characterised the task of PAs as being at least partially oriented toward the candidate's (re)selection process preceding the election:

"[O]ur office, our job is to make him be the best MSP he can be so that when he needs to go in front of the members to say "please keep me on", [and] he's got a

¹⁶ The Members' Expenses Scheme outlines how much MSPs can get reimbursed of their staff costs. In December 2020, the upper limited for getting staff costs reimbursed is at £85,000 per year (The Scottish Parliament, 2020).

¹⁷ Chapter 10 will investigate the relationship of the parliamentary offices by MPs/MSPs with the press units based in the parliament focusing on political communication efforts.

mountain of evidence to show that he's worthy of that." (Interviewee X, Interview on 16/08/2019)

The majority of interviewees confirmed the relevance of re-election considerations in their communication efforts, which resonates with the aforementioned notion of the need to be close like an "old couple". She explained that their office's communication approach explicitly aims to increase the salience of the parliamentarian among voters:

"[S]taff tries to promote him as a person with the view [that] [...] there's going to be an election, if he's the candidate, then [...] it's a good starting point [...] that [...] he has [...] establish[ed] the profile in people's minds already, and that they can readily recall where he's been active." (Interviewee Y, Interview on 20-08-2019)

With the importance of the need for a trust-based, close relationship, it is unsurprising that multiple accounts of communication officers confirmed that they were recruited after volunteering in the parliamentarian's campaigning trail or were already acquainted with the MP or MSP before the official application process started. Interviewee C and Interviewee S confirmed that the application process in a parliamentary office would be different to normal application processes in other working environments. It is adjusted to the political context of the parliamentary workplace: Ideally, the parliamentarian should find a "comrade" and not just an employee. Applying the standards and procedures of application processes in business contexts, for example, would not be efficient and effective for the parliamentarian for the reasons outlined above: it would increase his exposure to the *hidden characteristics problem* and the *hidden intentions problem*.

While it needs to be added that several interviewees confirmed that they got their roles through a regular application process, the inclusion of a political element into the recruitment process has been a recurring theme throughout the interviews. Therefore, the parliamentarians' recruitment practice of prioritising individuals involved in party activities instead of aiming at persons with a higher degree of professional experience, as the former senior politician has highlighted (see Interviewee C, Interview on 02/10/2019), usually mirrors the attempt to minimise the *hidden characteristics problem* as well as preventing or reducing the *hidden intentions problem*. It highlights the relevance of trust in the relationship between parliamentarians and their communication officers (see Figure 7) and reduces the likelihood of misaligned expectations and goals.

The recruitment process of MSPs and MPs acts as feedforward control over future communication and campaigning output to minimise principal-agent problems. Two principal-agent issues have been identified, shaping the process of hiring a communications officer: *hidden characteristics* and *hidden intentions*. The recruitment process is meant to make a trusting relationship between the parliamentarian and communication officer possible and decrease the principal's future need to exert direct control over the agent (e.g., through a rigorous, time-consuming sign-off process). This provides the communication officer with more autonomy to fulfil his duties. At the same time, it also ensures that this autonomy is more likely to be used in the best interest and aligned with the principal's expectations.

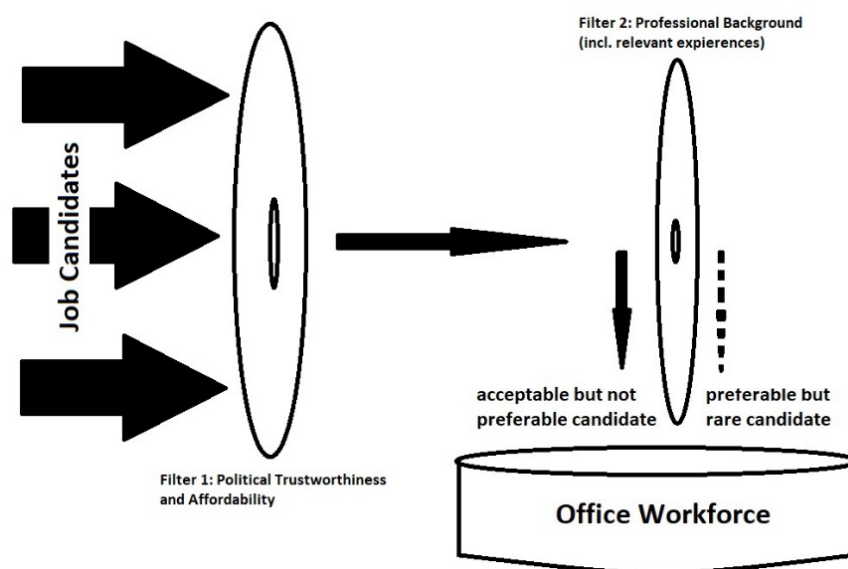


Figure 7 Hiring Practice of Parliamentary Assistants (including Communication Officers). Source: Own Research

8.1.2.2 *The Parliamentarian as Vetoplayer and Gatekeeper?: Concurrent and Feedback Control Mechanisms for hidden intentions and hidden actions problems*

The variation in how communication officers' roles are fulfilled, and duties are assigned mirrors the differences in office structures and interactions among the staff members on communication-related tasks encountered in the interviews. The individual interviewees outlined different setups, indicating that even MSPs and MPs of the same party with a similar mandate may opt for different approaches to divide the labour and deal with communication-related tasks. One aspect that all offices had in common was the sign-off process, which usually occurs at the end of the content creation process before communication is released.

"Here is the thing, [XA] has to check those because they are going out in his name. There has to be a sign-off process, there needs to be." (Interviewee S, Interview on 26/11/2021)

However, one interviewee explained a notable exception to this. He outlined that the sign-off would be at the beginning of the process by acquiring approval to use a quote from the politician as a starting point for creating the content around that statement:

"For [...] a press release for ZA, the first thing I will do is write the quote [...] at the end of the press release, and then I will hand that to ZA and make sure ZA is okay with that. Every quote gets signed off by the MSP. [...] So, I write the quote first and then work backwards from there with headline, key figure and background detail[s] [...]." (Interviewee B, Interview on 04/09/2019)

The sign-off process is done either directly by the parliamentarian or indirectly by a designated office manager approving on behalf of the MP or MSP. However, the extent to which content needs to be signed off varies. Some interviewees said that their parliamentarian does not require approval of the content if it is meant to be released on social media platforms (primarily Facebook) or if the content itself is rather mundane (e.g., announcing surgeries or visits to local businesses). Interviewed communication officers agreed that an explicit sign-off is acquired if the content is identified as politically sensitive.

The "politically sensitive" cases refer to content deemed controversial among the electorate and include output contradicting party lines. Releasing "politically problematic" statements can negatively affect a parliamentarian (e.g., the party of the MP or MSP may sanction the parliamentarian). Therefore, communication officers will ask for approval before releasing any such statement; they may also signpost the party press unit and the party leadership ahead of the release. In one case, an interviewee described a situation where a press release had been put out, consciously contradicting the leadership of the parliamentary party. It was known that this might have had the potential to cause friction between the party press team and the parliamentarian's office (see Interviewee K, Interview on 27/08/2019). Potential conflicts with the party or their press units based in the parliament and consequent sanctions based on the communication output may also impact the relationship between the communication officer and his employer. An interviewed former senior politician highlighted that some staff members of parliamentarians might consider advancing further in the party ranks and see employment as a PA or communication officer as a means to achieve this.

"I didn't have a huge number of staff in my time in elected office; I held onto my staff very well... largely because I think I was a good boss, but probably more importantly, my career was always on the rise, so people wanted to stick with me and follow me because I was going [...] into the leadership and onwards, whereas people would move from other offices to work for me, they wouldn't leave me to work for somebody else because there wasn't anybody more senior." (Interviewee C, Interview on 02/10/2019)

While just one participant, Interviewee N, explicitly confirmed this as being the case for his career plans (see Interview on 30/09/2019), it is noteworthy that several of the interviewees either already were candidates of their party before the interview took place or were selected as candidates at the point when this section has been written up (see Table 2).

Interviewee Parties	Interviewees	Candidate for National Elections
Scottish National Party	6	2
Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	9	1
Scottish Labour Party	10	1
Scottish Liberal Democrats	5	2
Scottish Green Party	2	1
Not Affiliated	1	0

Table 2 The table includes all interviewees of the fieldwork in 2019 who were employed as a PA of an MP/MSP at the time of the interview or were staff members of the press support unit of their party. To be counted as candidates, the interviewees must have been candidates for the UK General Election in 2019 or the Scottish Parliament election in 2021.

While all interviewees clearly outlined that they are loyal to their parliamentarian in case of a collision, e.g., with other political actors, some interviewees indicated that potential conflicts might create an ethical dilemma for them – particularly when core values are affected.

"[I]t [...] will be a personal ethical decision for me. [...] [S]ay, for example, YA decided that he was very into [controversial issue] now. Sorry, that is [a] ridiculous and absurd example [but i]t is easier. Then, if I was to continue working for him, I would communicate that line. That would be my job. He would be kicked out of the party, no doubt. Would I then continue working for YA in that situation? Probably not. [...] [T]hat [...] will be an ethical decision for me." (Interviewee B, Interview on 04/09/2019)

Another communication officer from a different political party has reinforced this point, stating that employment with some of the other elected representatives of her party would not be an option. Interviewee K emphasised that agreeing with their approach and work would be crucial for this employment. Consequently, she highlighted "certain

MSPs on this corridor that I wouldn't work for" (Interviewee K, Interview on 27/08/2019). The importance of mutual trust in the relationship between the communication officer and the parliamentarian is reiterated when considering that conflicts between their MP or MSP and the party could be problematic for the communication officer's political aspirations or create ethical dilemmas for the PA. It shapes the decision of the communication officer on whether to continue in their role and determines to what extent the parliamentarian will directly interfere in the communication output. It is also an indicator of the ability of the communication officer to effectively and authentically voice and reliably represent the parliamentarian in the communication output.

Usually, before content release, the sign-off process entails varying degrees of changes and alterations by the MP or MSP. Communication officers who have already worked for a while for their parliamentarian indicated that changes were typically minimal and often just concerned with the wording of passages within those texts. However, many interviewers explicitly or implicitly indicated that the editing process can be quite extensive.

"Once a week, maybe or something like that, he'll pick a press release that he wants to go a completely different angle on, and he'll completely edit it, or he doesn't like what I've written, and he'll completely rewrite [...], but the [usually it] is more [linguistic editing]." (Interviewee D, Interview on 02/09/2019)

In the same interview, the communication officer explained that the sign-off process is also used to ensure that the parliamentarian has an overview of outgoing communication so that they can react if directly contacted by journalists.

"UA likes to read everything [...] put out, more because [...] if somebody asked him what was it [...] and he doesn't remember. [...] [I]t's less of a case of trust. [...] I think he would be more than happy, and we have done it occasionally [...] where we've had nobody to get in touch with him, and we've sent out." (Interviewee D, Interview on 02/09/2019)

It can be concluded that the sign-off process fulfils three functions: First, it prevents content not aligned with the parliamentarian's position and "voice" from being released into the public domain. Second, it increases parliamentarians' awareness of the content published on their behalf. Third, it contributes to the creation process of the communication output through proofreading, linguistic changes or even significant alterations of the content itself. The involvement of MPs or MSPs in this process is usually limited. It depends on the parliamentarians' interests, their trust in their PAs'

abilities and the alignment of expectations of what and how content should be communicated. However, the extent of the involvement is limited by workload-related constraints and time pressures. The workload constraints can be events, the diary of the parliamentarian, or other time-sensitive tasks which could restrict the parliamentarian's capacity to engage extensively with drafted communication output on time. Several interviews have also emphasised that communication output targeting journalists must be sent to them in good time to meet their deadlines.

The sign-off process can be best understood by applying the veto player theory and the gatekeeper theory (for applications of gatekeeper theory in political communication, see, e.g., Miller et al., 2015, Serazio, 2014, Hussain, 2012). The aforementioned variety of how the process is set up – which pieces need to be signed off and which types of changes are to be expected, as well as who has the power to approve – are based on policies put in place by parliamentarians and cannot be changed without their consent. Therefore, MPs and MSPs are veto players (see, e.g. Ganghof, 2017, Tsebelis, 2002) for the policies guiding their parliamentary offices' internal processes for creating external communication; their explicit approval is required to change any of these rules. Once the rules are set, the parliamentarian acts as a gatekeeper for outgoing communication. The release of the office's communication can be granted or denied, or changes before release are requested by the parliamentarian. The setup of the sign-off and the execution of the process address two principal-agent problems: *hidden actions* and *hidden intentions*.

The *hidden action problems* are represented by the need to be aware of the content of the outgoing communication. If the parliamentarians are contacted concerning the contents of the external communication of their parliamentary offices, they need to be able to respond. Beyond this, it also prevents the release of potentially harmful content and ensures sufficient communication effort has been undertaken. The *hidden intentions problem* is addressed through content adjustments towards the parliamentarian's expectations on how issues should be discussed in communication output issued on behalf of the MP or MSP. Those changes, as outlined, can be the wording and framing of issues or even considering "a completely different angle" (Interviewee D, Interview on 02/09/2019) on a topic.

The trust in the communication officer's ability to voice the parliamentarian, that their expectation on the topic is met, and politically problematic content is avoided, is a

resource. It shapes the setup of the sign-off process and the amount of time needed to revise the drafts of the communication output. The trust in the ability to voice the tone and positions of the parliamentarian reduces the need for extensive editing and is, therefore, time-saving. Interviewees from offices with a less restrictive sign-off process highlighted that it took some time until those relaxations were in place. This is also the case for communication officers with professional experiences before joining the parliamentarian's office.

"TA gives me more autonomy than most might because generally, we've talked about it beforehand, so he'll tell me, you know, what he wanted to say in a press release [...], and then I'm [...] authorised to go away and write that up, but that relationship wasn't [...] like that to begin with [...] it never is because there's been [...] a level of learning [...] how TA is going to want things to be presented and then [...] a level of trust that is sort of built up over time." (Interviewee M, Interview on 30/08/2019)

This example reinforces the position of the parliamentarian as a veto player of communication policies within the office: Increasing trust may lead to a relaxation of the setup of the sign-off process, but permission for those changes needs to be explicitly given. The format and the process of approving the release of communication output represent control mechanisms to address the *hidden action* and *hidden intentions* problem: concurrent and feedback control. Feedback control is characterised by controlling the communication output, while concurrent control refers to the control mechanism alongside the content creation process.

Feedback control is practised when the sign-off process represents the endpoint of the content creation process before publishing the content. That means the content is usually approved for release, and required changes are limited, e.g., proofreading or wording. Concurrent control is exercised when controlling is applied during the content creation process and not at the end of it. Some interviewees mentioned that their parliamentarian regularly asks for rather extensive changes, changing the entire content in style, tone and perspective. In those cases, the parliamentarian becomes the co-creator of the communication output. MPs and MSPs utilising this approach influence the creation process directly rather than being the endpoint by granting approval or asking for minimal changes.

The degree of involvement of the parliamentarian in the drafting process varies. Beyond the signing-off process, concurrent control can also be observed when parliamentarians

provide the key points and ideas during or at the beginning of the content creation process. Those ideas are usually at the centre of the communication output.

"SA will write into the local newspapers and maybe once every [...] four of five weeks. [...] A lot of that will come from SA; perhaps it's something she's dealt with in the constituency she would like to talk about, and perhaps it is something related to [the portfolio area] that she wants to talk about. [...] [S]ometimes we will have something to present to her, and she will heavily edit it, [...] giving it her own style, her own words. Other times, she will have a document she will give to us to edit and tidy up and make it more journalistic [...]. But it is probably 50/50, to be perfectly honest with you." (Interviewee O, Interview on 19/08/2019)

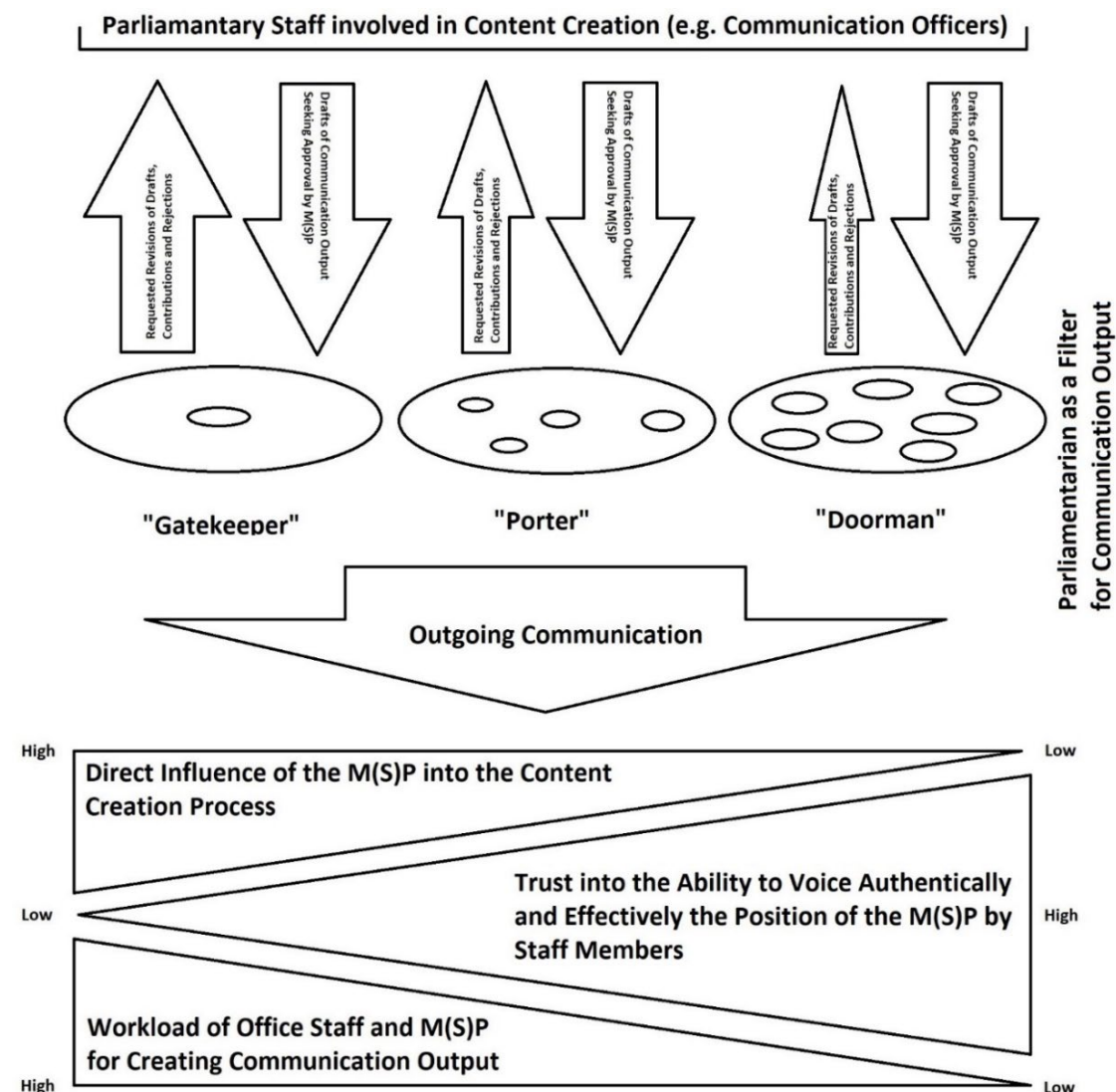


Figure 8 Three types of "filter" positions held by parliamentarians with associated degrees of workload, trust and direct influence in the content creation process. (Source: Own Research)

The differences that emerged in interviews on how MPs and MSPs exercise control over the communication output can be clustered into three categories based on the parliamentarian's influence over the communication output (see Figure 8).

Parliamentarians who exercise a high degree of control over the communication output through rigid application of the signing-off processes functioning as a content filter, resulting in intense revisions, are designated to the *Gatekeeper* category. The high degree of influence over communication by the MP or MSP is usually based on low levels of trust in the PAs responsible for external communication. This approach increases the workload for those PAs since the signing-off procedures, including revisions, are more time-consuming.

MPs or MSPs exercising moderate control over the communication output are categorised as *Doorman*. Compared to the *Gatekeeper*, the *Doorman's* requests for revisions are limited in number and intensity. The *Doorman* might want to get involved in the content creation process, e.g., by drafting their columns themselves, but the involvement is limited, content-specific, or circumstantial. The reduced influence over the communication output is based on medium levels of trust toward the PA. Still, since signing-off procedures remain in place for most communication output and regular and systematic requests for revisions are made, there is a substantial workload for the PA resulting from the parliamentarian's approach. However, the resulting workload is moderate compared to the heightened workload created by the *Gatekeeper* approach.

The *Porter* is characterised by less restrictive signing-off procedures and less frequent or usually very minor revision requests. *Porters* might agree to exempt specific communication output from the need to be signed off (such as content which is not considered politically sensitive). Consequently, the parliamentarian's influence over the communication output is lower than in the *Doorman* or *Gatekeeper* category. The *Porter* approach builds upon high trust in the communication officer or PA. The workload for the communication officer is reduced under those circumstances since the signing-off procedures and requests for revisions are far less time-consuming than the other two categories. It needs to be highlighted that with increasing trust throughout the working relationship, the parliamentarian's approach might change over time.

However, the different approaches towards involvement and control of the content creation process are just partly explained by trust-related concerns. Several interviewees highlighted that their parliamentarians are more involved in communication output (for example, writing speeches or columns) if they are invested in the topic or have a particular insight into it. They may author the output or provide detailed instructions on

the content. Less interest in the topic, or the absence of knowledge, increases the autonomy of the communication officer in the communication process.

"[W]hat a lot of people don't realise in the outside, in [...] public is a lot of politicians do speeches of things they know nothing about and [...] have no interest in. So, they have been asked by their party to speak on that topic. [T]hat kind of speech will always be written [almost] entirely [...] by someone like me. Because naturally [the] politician is not going to spend the time writing a speech on architectural importance in Central Scotland when they have got [...] more important things to [do]." (Interviewee H, Interview on 23/08/2019)

8.2 Who is in control, and how important is political communication anyway?

The relevance of communication and the limited autonomy of communication officers

The role of the communication officer is primarily concerned with voicing the parliamentarian's position authentically to critical stakeholders, such as constituents, party members and journalists. The overarching goal of their responsibilities, and indeed the responsibility of any staff member of an MP or MSP, is to work towards the parliamentarian's re-election. The selection of and the interaction with the communication officer by the MP or MSP is shaped by the individual parliamentarian's trust in the abilities of the PA to fulfil these responsibilities and sufficiently contribute to achieving the goal of getting re-elected. The importance of trust in the relationship between communication officers and parliamentarians can be best understood by applying the principal-agent model. Three underlying problems shaping the parliamentarian's recruitment and interactions with the communication officer have been identified: *hidden characteristics*, *hidden actions*, and *hidden intentions*.

The degree of autonomy of the communication officer in fulfilling their role, as well as the ownership and control over the communication output, are shaped by the parliamentarian's control measures. How much control is exercised depends on whether the communication officer is trusted to voice their MP's or MSP's position authentically and contribute to the parliamentarian's position favourably for the next election. The need for trust and the need to control communication on behalf of an MP or MSP, as the last two sections have shown, are essential drivers in the recruitment process and the involvement of MPs and MSPs alike in the content creation process.

The relationship between parliamentarians and communication officers is also characterised by the lack of resources, which creates the need for further flexibility of

the individual to be willing to take over responsibilities beyond communication-related tasks. While financial constraints restrict the number of staff members, the workload within offices fluctuates. It requires that communication officers, if necessary, take on additional, non-communication-related duties. Legal requirements also shape the scarcity of sources: PAs are paid by the parliament and are not allowed to do party political activities and campaigning work (compare with The Scottish Parliament, 2023, Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, 2023) during their work time.

"A member shall not submit a claim which relates to party political activity, and a member shall not enter into any arrangement which could give rise to a benefit to a party political organisation." (The Scottish Parliament, 2023, Section 1)

Consequently, electoral campaigning and party-political work are not officially part of the job description. Still, the willingness to participate in canvassing and campaigning activities for the party and the parliamentarian is often part of the informal expectations towards staff members and job applicants. Those expectations are to be fulfilled after work or on weekends in a voluntary capacity, which adds to the already high workload and demands flexibility. While interviewees disagreed on the average length of the tenure of a communications officer with an individual MP or MSP, they confirmed that there is a high staff turnover and that being employed by a parliamentarian is usually time-limited. In one case, a former PA highlighted that one of the parliamentarians he knows is setting a time limit for employed staff members; contracts coming to an end will not be renewed:

"I know SA actually has like an unofficial policy [...] he wants people to not work for him for more than three years." (Interviewee T, Interview on 08/01/2021)

The relatively short tenure is due to a variety of reasons: the workload, long working hours and relatively low payment, potential workplace-related issues, such as a tense atmosphere or diverging expectations of how to fulfil their role appropriately (see Interviewee T, Interview on 08/01/2021 or Interviewee C, Interview on 02/10/2019), and the possibility that the parliamentarian is not re-elected and consequently staff members' contracts are coming to an end. Additionally, the personal ambitions of the PAs are also relevant factors. Some interviewees highlighted that those political ambitions might motivate them to change jobs, for example, becoming a parliamentarian or working in the headquarters of the party (see, e.g., Interviewee S, Interview on 26/11/2021). There has also been the suggestion that working in the

parliament for two or three years would help to get employment in NGOs, public affairs or lobbying organisations (see Interviewee T, Interview on 08/01/2021). Working as a parliamentary assistant can also be a "stepping stone" for career development. Incumbents of this role may consider terminating their contracts as soon as adequate job opportunities arise.

It can be concluded that the degree of control parliamentarians have over the communication output will be relatively high for most communications officers. One of the interviewees described acquiring the skills to voice the parliamentarian and fulfil their expectations as a "learning curve". Consequently, it takes time for MPs and MSPs to consider easing the sign-off process and giving the communication officer more autonomy. Considering that the average tenure of those PAs is relatively short for the outlined reasons, it questions whether most communication officers will ever experience the transformation of the parliamentarian from a *Gatekeeper* to a *Doorman* or even a *Porter* (see Figure 8). Even if the tenure lasts long enough to have more autonomy and a relaxed sign-off process, their experience and developed skills will make them more attractive to other employers, increasing the chance of leaving their post. Terminating their contract would restart the "Lifecycle of a Communication Officer" (see Figure 9), with relatively low trust towards the new entrants requiring a high degree of control to minimise outlined principle-agent problems.

However, new entrants may be already employed PAs reassigned to the new role. Several interviewees outlined that their work is sometimes done by other staff members, which would give them some experience they could build upon. One of the interviewees highlighted that he would purposefully train other staff members to enable them to take over such responsibilities if required (see also Interviewee R, Interview on 22/08/2019 or Interviewee D, Interview on 02/09/2019). Overall, this may decrease the time necessary to acquire the required trust to significantly reduce the exercised control over the communication output by the parliamentarian.

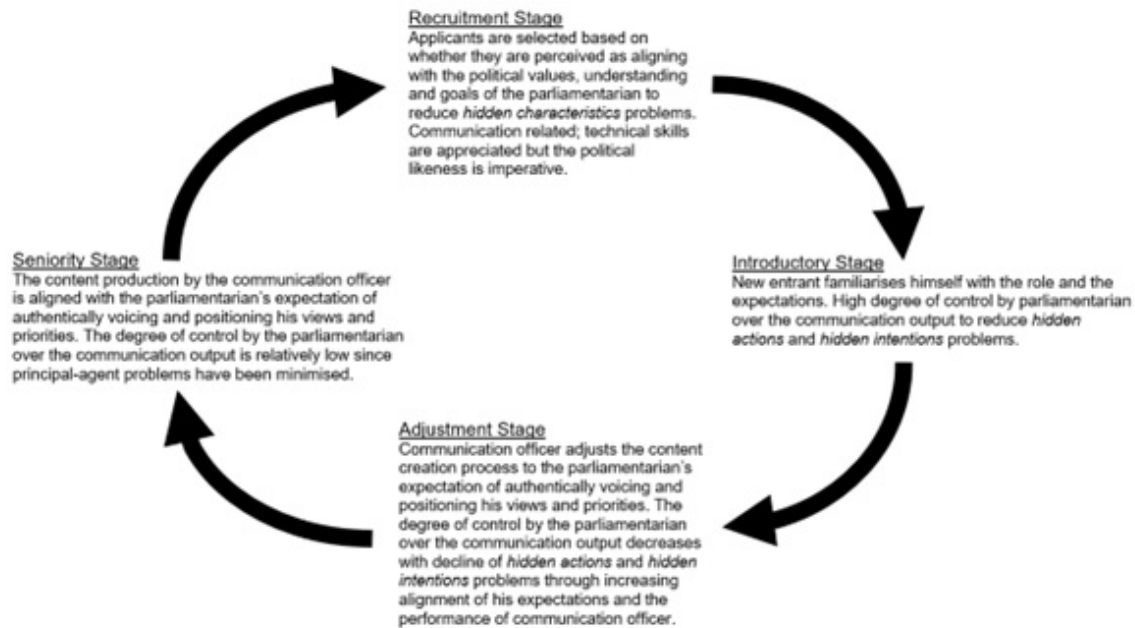


Figure 9 Lifecycle of a Communication Officer (Source: Own Research).

Some offices have no clear designation for media and communication-related work (see Chapter 9); content creation would be a team effort (see Chapter 6.3 on the distinction between *groups* and *teams*), making it easier to replace leaving staff members. However, these kinds of working arrangements also reduce the "learning on the job"-experience in communication-related duties, which increases the time needed to acquire the trust to minimise the control measures. Additionally, those conditions would mean that the ownership and control over the communication output by the individuals involved in the content creation process are minimal, even with a *Doorman* sign-off. Under those circumstances, the communication output would be a product of collaboration among several individuals, meaning that none of them can control the process or claim ownership. Consequently, this also limits the autonomy of their communication-related work.

The degree of autonomy of the communication officer and the constraints introduced through the control mechanism of the parliamentarian on the content creation process address the first research question. The approach MPs and MSPs use to control external communication mirrors the importance of media relations and communication with key stakeholders. Communication-related duties are vital to parliamentary offices, but it also needs to be considered that communication officers are usually involved in other tasks, too. It is also noteworthy that some interviewees indicated that their parliamentarians

prioritise certain kinds of communication output (see, e.g., Interviewee P, Interview on 16/09/2019). It is, for example, not unusual that content published on social media (such as Facebook) is "recycled" material that has been either used for press releases or has not been deemed relevant enough to create a separate press release.

"It's not like something I'll write new, specifically for Facebook." (Interviewee L, Interview on 19/08/2019)

The hierarchy of relevance is also mirrored in the tendency for posts on social media platforms to have a more relaxed sign-off process than press releases provided to journalists. It also needs to be added that Twitter accounts, on the other hand, are often managed by MPs or MSPs themselves without getting their communication officers involved:

"With Twitter, KA will tweet herself...when she tweets, it's more of a political statement. She's wanting to say it because politicians use Twitter as their official, like, their official platform now." (Interviewee K, Interview on 27/08/2019)

Additionally, the informal expectations of getting involved in campaigning activities are arguably part of the role of a PA – regardless of whether the person is primarily responsible for communication tasks. Consequently, communication-related responsibilities can be distinguished between formally assigned tasks outlined in the job description and unofficial duties, which must be completed outside working hours. This differentiation must be considered when evaluating the importance of communication-related tasks (see Figure 10). Communication-related tasks are essential if only formal duties are considered, but they do not override the relevance of other responsibilities (such as research and casework). However, if informal obligations are accounted for, communication-related tasks (such as campaigning and canvassing) play a much more significant role.

The informal obligations, which played a considerable role in the accounts of interviewees, do not necessarily create tension with their formal obligations. Within the context of their role's purpose, as understood by interviewees themselves, to promote the work of their employers (the MPs or the MSPs) and assist in their re-election efforts, informal and formal responsibilities and tasks are aligned. However, it does create tension with the stated purpose as defined by the legal framework guiding their deployment and payment, excluding the use of the allowances for party political work or (electoral) campaigning purposes – which is grounded in the funding by taxpayers

rather than by the individual parliamentarian. Interviewed PAs have usually shown awareness of the legal constraints and this tension (illustrated by the term "technically" used by Interviewee D):

"We are parliamentary staff, so *technically* we are not paid by the party, you know, so we have to be quite careful in what we do." (Interviewee D, Interview on 02/09/2019)

Beyond the tension between how their role officially has been conceived and how it is exercised in practice, it also creates difficulties for the PAs: Managing the blurry line between the formal and informal realm gives the parliamentarian power and limits the PA's agency, particularly considering that PAs have usually limited work experiences (as illustrated in Section 8.1.2.1). It reinforces the incentives to leave the role at a seniority stage (see Figure 9), given that the informal demands of their role add to their already substantial workload and workplace-related stress.

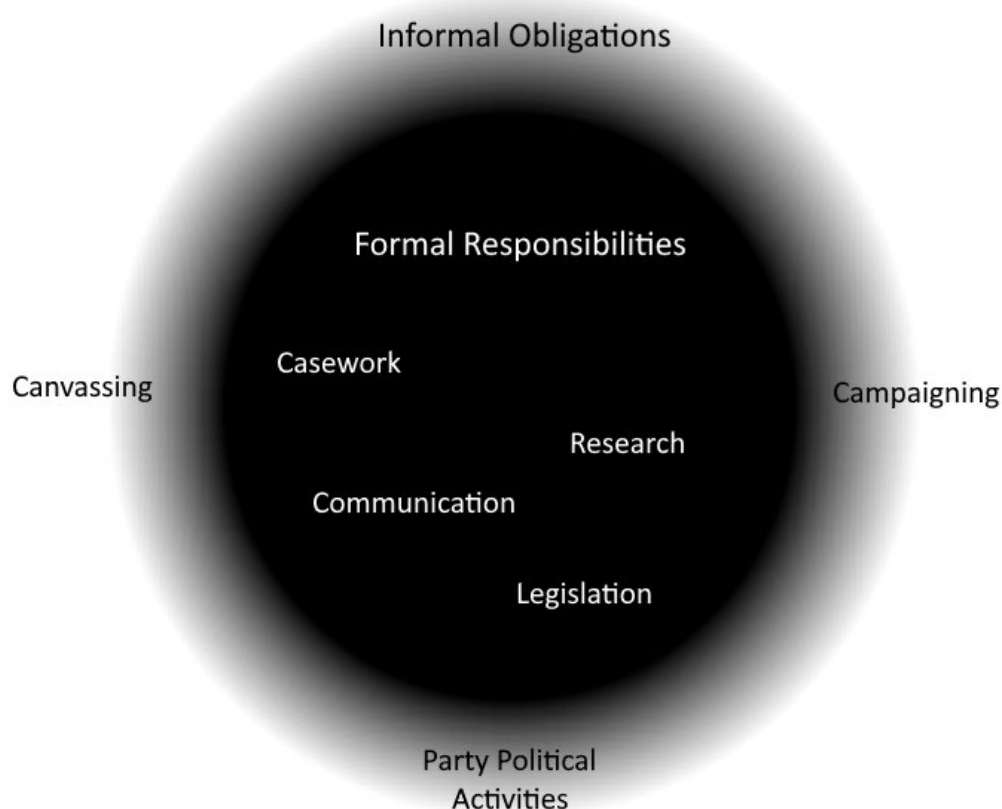


Figure 10 Informal versus Formally Areas of Responsibilities for Communication Officers (Source: Own Research)

The degree of control parliamentarians exercise to minimise principal-agent problems provides insight into how media relations and external communication are managed.

While the degree of control varies among parliamentarians, the majority of interviewees illustrated a comparatively restrictive sign-off process that, at times, increases the influence of the MP or MSP over the content to the extent that the parliamentarian and communication officer can claim shared ownership over the communication output (visualised in Figure 11).

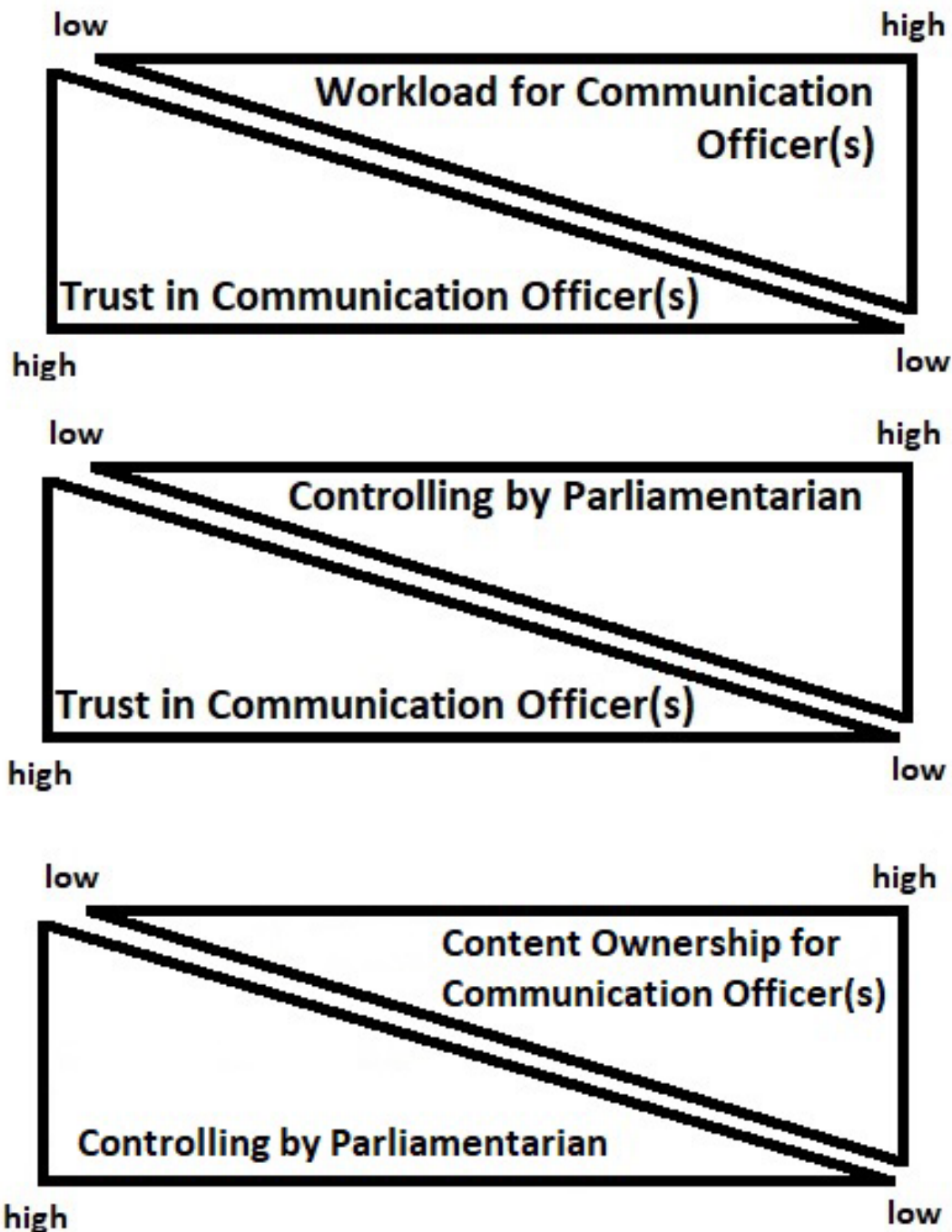


Figure 11 Trust of the parliamentarian in the ability of the communication officer to voice their positions reliably has a significant impact on the capacity of the communication officer to fulfil their role. It directly determines his workload and indirectly shapes the degree of content ownership.

Additionally, the drive to reduce principal-agent problems shapes the recruitment process of PAs. Although there is no uniform approach, selecting applicants who have been personally known before their application or were already involved in party political activities or campaigns is not unusual among MPs and MSPs. However, it must be added that self-selection and financial constraints contribute equally to this phenomenon. Interviewees highlighted that they would not have applied if their values and political preferences conflicted with those of the parliamentarian. The budget restrictions might also disincentivise PR and communication specialists' applications, limiting the availability of skilled and experienced job candidates.

The management of the parliamentarian's relationship towards the communication officer is also not fixed and evolves. While control measures can initially be quite intrusive in the content creation process, they usually relax over time and change from concurrent and feedback control to feedback control only. However, the limited degree of autonomy at the beginning contributes to a higher workload that incentivises an early job change. Also, suppose the relationship between the communication officer and parliamentarian does not progress towards higher degrees of trust and less control, it might contribute to terminating the contract within one or two years. Even if the relationship thrives and mutual trust can be established, the comparatively high workload, relatively low pay, and long work hours still provide reasons to leave the post.

The outlined workplace-related pressures are particularly problematic since communication officers can acquire skills and experiences within a relatively short employment period of two or three years that open up better-paid opportunities in other sectors. Consequently, a high staff turnover impacts the management of external communication and media relations. It is shaped by the presence or absence of parliamentarians' trust in their communication officers and resource-binding control measures seeking to mitigate perceived principal-agent problems. While the relationship evolves, financial restrictions, workload and prolonged working hours promote an early exit of the communication officer from their role. The termination of the contract often leads to a setback in the handling of external communication within the office since a new job entrant would need to restart the process of acquiring the necessary trust and developing the required communication skills through training "on the job" (see, e.g., Interviewee D, Interview on 02/09/2019). Even if job entrants already

have substantial experience in public relations or journalism – and may not need to develop those skills during their tenure – the degree of control by the parliamentarian would still be substantial until a trusting relationship has been established. Consequently, those already experienced communication officers would be limited in applying and exercising their skills, at least to some degree. This finding is mirrored in Abbott et al. (2020), illustrating that applying one's specialist skills effectively and efficiently in a political setting may be undermined by the control measures of the overseeing politician.

8.3 Conclusion

The findings significantly contribute to the scholarly debates on the mediatisation of politics and the professionalisation of political communication. The consequences of the attempt by parliamentarians to control principal-agent problems contradict the theory of increasing professionalisation of political communication and refute the idea of mediatised politics outlined in previous chapters. The theory of growing professionalisation of political communication assumes that there would be an increasing involvement of communication specialists and the application of methods used in public relations. However, the experiences and skills of communication officers at the beginning of their employment are usually limited. Necessary experiences may be acquired over time, but due to a high turnover rate, parliamentarians may not come to utilise the newly developed skill set of their PAs since their tenure is often time-limited. The increasing professionalism of the communication officer is a pull factor for leaving their employment with the MP or MSP since other employers may be willing to provide more attractive workplace offers. Even if experienced communication specialists are recruited as communication officers, they may still be subject to control measures that undermine their ability to use their skills professionally.

The mediatisation theory assumes that political logic would be replaced by media logic. While external communication and media relations play an essential role in the activities of parliamentarians' offices, political logic is arguably not replaced by media logic. The recruitment process illustrates the limited influence of media logic: Instead of prioritising experience in professional communication, the resonance to one's political values and expectations is as important. The control exercised over the communication output reinforces this finding: The autonomy and control of communication officers

over content creation and media relations are usually limited; they may not have professional experiences before their employment, and as soon as those skills are acquired by learning, "on the job", they might choose to leave.

Although these findings are significant for understanding the limitations of mediatisation and professionalisation of political communications within a parliamentary context, it is worth stating the diversity of the different arrangements poses a challenge. It depends on the preferences of the parliamentarian, how many resources are assigned to communication tasks and whether there are informal expectations towards additional campaigning activities outside working hours. Some MPs and MSPs may deem political communication less relevant for various reasons (e.g., in case re-election is not sought) or do not want to explore "grey areas" by relying on staff members for activities outside of their contractual obligations. This idiosyncrasy might also be reflected in the priorities over the kinds of communication-related tasks and how they are managed. However, Chapter 10.1 will also show that PPGs usually have arrangements that address national media's needs. This arguably establishes a baseline for political communication throughout the PPG, which limits the communication work individual parliamentarians need to undertake.

Some interviewees noted the growing importance of social media in their work (see Interviewee P, Interview on 16/09/2019 or Interviewee N, Interview on 30/09/2019). However, most participants indicated that providing unique content for social media platforms is of limited relevance to the communication approach of their parliamentary offices. This variation is also reflected in parliamentarians' degree of control and involvement in posts on social media platforms.

"[S]ometimes [it is] difficult to manage social media because XA has access to himself primarily, which can sometimes be difficult, [...] so for instance [...] on social media [...] you know, having loads and loads of post a day is not doing anything for your likes or your views, so it's sometimes difficult to manage that with XA [...] keeping it to maybe three or four post[s] a day [...]" (Interviewee F, Interview on 23/08/2020)

Personal preferences and expectations for effective communication may also differ and lead to more or less control, which can also be a source of conflict between the communication manager and parliamentarian, whereby the means of control leave the parliamentarian as the final decision-maker.

"[T]here's also a point about reconciling. You want [...] it to look authentic, but you also want the message to be good. What the politician might want to say might not always be the best way to phrase [it]." (Interviewee J, Interview on 27/08/2019)

Some of those variations might be due to personal preferences and perceptions among parliamentarians of effective and efficient management of communication-related matters. However, MPs' and MSPs' professional experience in public relations or journalism may also significantly impact the degree of control exercised or importance assigned to communication and media relations (see Interviewee U, Interview on 30/09/2019). It has also been indicated that the lack of experience among new parliamentarians in running a parliamentary office and conducting recruitment processes might also cause variations in how the different areas and tasks within the office are approached and managed (see Interviewee S, Interview on 26/11/2021).

The various professional backgrounds of communication officers themselves cause another limitation. While it was rare for communication officers to have experience in public relations, media relations, or journalism, some worked in those areas before their employment with the MP or MSP (see, e.g., Interviewee L, Interview on 19/08/2019 or Interviewee B, Interview on 04/09/2019). Parliamentarians still exercise control mechanisms in those cases; however, staff members may be able to adjust their approach faster than PAs without a professional communication background and, with this, could build a trusting relationship more quickly. Equally, interviewees may not have had a professional background in media or communication-related sectors before working as a communication officer. Still, they acquired those skills "on the job" and either remained in that post or took up a similar role in other parliamentarians' offices, press units or party headquarters (see, e.g., Interviewee I, Interview on 06/09/2019, Interviewee S, Interview on 26/11/2021 or Interviewee U, Interview on 30/09/2019). Notably, there are cases of communication officers with significant professional experiences and expertise acquired before their employment. However, those are rare and rather unusual.

The findings primarily shed light on the impact of financial constraints and principal-agent problems on the political communication process of parliamentarians' offices, irrespective of the mandate of the parliamentarian (MP or MSP, list or constituency mandate). However, those constraints are not limited to communication officers only. They may impact – to some extent – other staff members with different tasks within the

office (e.g., focus on research or casework). While further investigations of the generalisability of these findings are required, it would be worthwhile exploring to what extent and how other PAs are affected. It is noteworthy that there was little indication of a considerable difference between the offices of MPs and the different types of MSPs. The parliamentarian's approach towards control, trust, recruitment, formal vs informal responsibilities and the "Lifecycle of a Communication Officer" did not seem to be affected by the type of mandate they hold.

9 Findings II – Solo-Effort, Group-Effort or Team-Effort: The inner workings of parliamentary offices on political communications

Parliamentarians usually have no direct contact with constituents. According to Blackwell et al. (2019, p. 38), only 12% of voters had direct contact with their local councillor or parliamentarian. The results are based on a survey that does not distinguish between the different means of reaching out to a politician (e.g., face-to-face meetings, phone calls, social media, or email) and includes councillors not part of any parliament. Consequently, 12% should be understood as an upper threshold for the direct engagement of voters with their designated MPs or MSPs. Additionally, some of the usual ways of contacting the local politicians are mediated and therefore not "direct", even though the individual attempting to communicate with the politician misunderstands this as direct communication. Thus, the importance of indirect communication between parliamentarians and constituents is not to be understated.

Constituents are more likely to be exposed to information about the parliamentarian by third parties (e.g., local media) or on behalf of the parliamentarian (e.g., posts on social media on behalf of the parliamentarian). It is also important to note that communication on behalf of the parliamentarian is often not distinguishable from communication created by the parliamentarian. Interviewees highlighted that it is a crucial part of their job to voice the parliamentarian authentically, making it challenging for a third party to distinguish whether, for example, a column has been written by the parliamentarian or by his staff members. Even distinguishing between third-party communication (e.g., by local media) and communication issued by the parliamentary office of an MP or MSP is not unproblematic. Several parliamentary assistants explained that they aim to write press releases adjusted to the anticipated needs of journalists so that the journalist partially or entirely copies press releases and uses them for the next issue of their news outlet (see, e.g., Chapter 10.1.2).

It has been established that various factors shape voting behaviour and political attitudes. Some of those factors are outside the merits of the behaviour of individual candidates and parliamentarians, e.g., related to the party or its manifesto. However, the personal vote is still a relevant variable, particularly in the Scottish electoral systems, which have strong plurality-based elements for voting for individual candidates (see Chapter 5.2). Individual characteristics, such as residency, local engagement, or occupation, can impact voter choices. The communication output (see Chapter 10)

addresses those characteristics and attempts to frame the parliamentarian favourably. It is unclear to what extent this communication output shapes the view of constituents about their local parliamentarian. However, it can be established that local media coverage of elected representatives and their activities and, increasingly, their communication on social media platforms are factors to be considered.

With personal contact either being very limited or non-existent, communication about the parliamentarian is usually indirectly communicated by third parties (e.g., a news report in local media) or directly in the parliamentarian's name by one of their PAs (e.g., a column of an MP in a newspaper or a post on the official social media account). Considering those communication efforts might impact the attitude of constituents towards the parliamentarian or constituents' voting behaviour, the question of communication ownership is of crucial importance: Communication on behalf of parliamentarians has been created by others and contributes to their public image. Consequently, the constituent's "personal vote" is essentially based on their perception of an individual whose public persona is significantly shaped by its staff members' efforts. Therefore, it is essential to establish who has ownership and control over the communication output on behalf of parliamentarians.

The last chapter discussed the findings, emphasising the relationship between the parliamentarian and his communication officer(s). This findings chapter will focus on the inner workings of the staff members involved in drafting the communication output before the parliamentarian enacts the signing-off procedure. Although interviewees highlighted that those processes vary from office to office, there are shared features best understood by distinguishing between the analytical lens of *solo*, *group*, and *team* effort. While interviewees usually labelled their work within the parliamentary office as *teamwork*, the interactions are often organised as a *group* effort rather than a *team* effort. This is mirrored in the set-up of communication- and media-related tasks, usually done as a *group* rather than by one designated single communication officer or a *team*. It is notable, however, that a common characteristic of all parliamentary offices' organisation of their political communication is a high degree of interaction among parliamentary assistants within the office. The crucial difference between the different types of effort is the degree of individual accountability and autonomy of involved PAs over creating the communication output before the sign-off process takes place. The findings will show that the chosen arrangements significantly impact the political communication

process and, consequently, shape the content and presentation of the communication output.

Beyond the direct consequences of the choice between *solo effort*, *group effort* or *team effort*, it significantly impacts the professionalisation process of the PAs involved in communication efforts. The decentralisation of the different communication tasks (either through *group* or *team effort*) limits PAs' exposure to these tasks, which reduces the opportunities to learn from them and, therefore, to professionalise. Similar to the results outlined in the previous chapter, the parliamentarians' interests and preferences are significant factors in setting up those arrangements. In addition, their interpersonal relations with their staff members are another factor that has been identified as significant. It also influences the stability of the arrangements, staff turnover and, with those, the professionalisation process of PAs involved in the communication process.

The following sections will present and explain those findings on the intra-office and inter-office dynamics of the communication output creation processes. The analysis builds upon the theoretical framework proposed in Chapter 6.3 that conceptualises the scholarly debate around the distinction between *groups* and *teams*. The results will be contextualised in the broader context of professionalisation and mediatisation theories. The wider implications of the findings will be explored in the last section.

9.1 Is it a group effort, solo effort or teamwork? Conceptualising experiences and conceptual misunderstandings

Interviewees often described working arrangements in parliamentary offices as idiosyncratic. However, a common theme in interviews is that work on communication-related tasks is characterised as *teamwork* or *team effort*. For instance, interviewees explained their understanding of *team effort* by outlining that other staff members would proofread and edit press releases or that ideas for communication output, such as a column or a post on social media, might originate from colleagues. An interviewed caseworker explained one of those processes with the understanding that this would be a *team effort*:

"[S]ometimes they will say to me, Is there any casework that is maybe newsworthy? [...] Other times, I know stuff that I am [...] researching [...] [s]uff like that I can easily say to the rest of the team. Here's what's happening. Here is how we can promote it." (Interviewee O, Interview on 19/08/2019)

The outlined description could equally describe a *team effort* or a *group effort*. While interviewees have often used the term *team* or *teamwork*, it refers to different types and interaction qualities. Identifying whether a *team*, *group* or *solo effort*, based on the classification provided by the interviewees, is therefore difficult since the interviewee's understanding might not correspond with the outlined criteria of the distinction between *groups* and *teams* in Chapter 6.3. The lack of conceptual clarity regarding *groups*, *teams* and *teamwork* is also described in some of the case studies by Katzenbach and Smith (2015). However, interviewees accompanied their classification of working as a *team* with examples and more detailed explanations of their interactions. Those descriptions of the workplace dynamics allowed (re)evaluation of whether communication has been approached as a *group* or *team effort*.

Another challenge was the absence of a clear designation of the role of the communication officer in some parliamentary offices. The task of creating a particular communication output may be assigned ad-hoc, depending on the workload of individual staff members rather than their skills and experiences in creating communication output. However, the division of labour can also be done by considering pre-existing experiences with communication medium or familiarity with the topic.

"So, RA has [...] two full-time staff in the office, myself and my colleague [...], and if it is housing-related, which is part of RA's portfolio, it tends to be [colleague] that will write it. If it's something more environmental, it'll be myself that does it, and then there is a series of sign-offs and proofread before we post it."
(Interviewee R, Interview on 22/08/2019)

The description indicated a *group effort*: The interaction among staff members was limited and focused on proofreading rather than intense collaboration. The notion of skill and experience-based differentiation of communication-related tasks, which are relatively fixed arrangements, also indicate *group work*. However, the emphasis on the flexibility of these arrangements – it "tends to be" the colleague rather than a clear designation – and sequences of proofreading undertaken by staff members could lead to changes in the original texts which go beyond linguistic alterations and might change the character and angle of the output. In this instance, individual accountability would be reduced and replaced by shared accountability instead. The shift towards mutual accountability characterises a *team effort* rather than a *group* or *solo effort*.

On other occasions, such as issue-based campaigns requiring additional communication effort, the communication officer's interplay with other office members may also

become crucial for the final shape of the communication output. In this particular context, communication-related tasks were not assigned in their own right but rather as an element of a bigger and more significant project:

"[T]he [prominent issue] survey [...] [and its] subsequent campaign [...] took everyone, so we had the office manager [...] who was on getting diary appointments that TA could speak to people involved with the companies that provide the [...] infrastructure, we had interns that came in to help us package it all up and get the stuff out, [...] we had other interns came in and help[ed] us do the [...] local press as well, so [...] there's not really anything that we do that is 100% a solo effort." (Interviewee M, Interview on 30/08/2019)

Whether this office has a group-style arrangement for communication-related duties depends on the degree of integration. The example describes the integration of the communication officer into a *group* project. The aims and objectives of that project were provided, and tasks were primarily allocated based on experiences and skill sets. While the work on this project has been organised as a *group*, considering that projects like this might occupy limited amounts of the communication work, the communication of this office might still be closer to a *solo effort*. Indeed, from the descriptions of this interviewee, most communication-related work is rather reactive to events during the week and not necessarily project-based. While involvement in those projects might be part of the role, reacting to parliamentary business and contributions of the parliamentarian and issues arising in the constituency seem to occupy most of the work undertaken in the capacity of a communication officer. Consequently, describing this PA's role as a *solo effort* rather than a *team* or *group effort* would be more accurate, even if his role comprises elements of *group efforts* by occasionally integrating his role into campaigns and projects, which may entail tasks which are not communication-related.

It must be considered that parliamentarians are free to pursue policy issues of their choice and use the resources to campaign for change. Some MPs and MSPs (see MA or RA) conduct long-term campaigns (e.g., on housing and drug consumption) on matters they are interested in. When those long-term campaigns shape a significant proportion of the communication output and occupy considerable work time dedicated to communication matters, communication-related duties qualify as a *group* or *team effort*. Interviewee F, for instance, provided a typical case, explaining in greater detail an example of how the campaigning-related tasks have been divided and coordinated between the staff members of the parliamentary office.

"XA's involved in several campaigns [...] [prominent issue] caused quite a lot of severe injury, [affected individuals] who've been left in terrible condition because of their use of this [...] device, so often what we'll do is that we'll work with journalists, [colleague regularly involved in communication tasks] will send [...] quite a lot of freedom of information inquiries, letters to the government, he would then pass that on to me, and if it was [...] issues that we want to get on social media, or [...] put that in a graphic or put that in a video, we would work together to see how best we can do that, how best we get the message across, [in] [...] the last year we had a press conference that was based in the parliament [...] that involved a few of the [affected individuals] coming along." (Interviewee F, Interview on 23/08/2019)

Interviewee F described a campaign their parliamentarian had been involved in, identifying the different tasks which ought to be done and how they fed into the communication approach. The various activities during this campaign have been described as integrated and linked rather than compartmentalised or detached. These activities, such as freedom of information inquiries, were directly related to the communication efforts. Consequently, the qualification of communication as a *group effort* or, to some extent, as a *team effort* should be considered. Creating the communication output was not self-contained but, at its foundation, a result of coordinated activities within the parliamentary office: The communication officers depended on those activities to create the communication output.

Within the limitations outlined above, most parliamentary offices approached communication as a *solo* or *group effort*, irrespective of the type of mandate the parliamentarian was holding (MP, MSP, list or constituency mandate). However, significant interactions among all staff members are usual and sometimes blur the line between *solo* and *group effort* as well as *group effort* and *team effort*. In most cases, *group efforts* seem to have been the most common form of organising communication efforts since it was rare that all relevant communication tasks (including speech writing and social media) were done solely by one individual. While *group effort* has been identified as the most common arrangement for political communication-related work, it is also important to explore the flexible nature of those arrangements. They help to understand the dynamics between involved members of those offices and illustrate the conditionalities of the classifications of communication as a *solo effort*, *group effort* and *team effort*. Additionally, the degree of integration and interdependence of the activities of parliamentary offices require further discussion since it illuminates the interactive nature of the working relationships in the parliamentary office. They also show that

despite being a *group effort*, some characteristics of those arrangements show similarities to *teamwork* arrangements.

9.2 Flexibility, Structural Constraints and Interdependence

In his role as a communication officer, being integrated into other activities of the parliamentary office (such as campaigns) can significantly impact whether the communication is to be understood as a *solo effort*, *group effort* or *team effort*. This needs to be understood with explicit consideration of PAs occupying the role of communication officers usually function as "jack of all trades" and are consequently involved in a variety of tasks which are not directly related to communication-related responsibilities. However, while those tasks might not produce communication output by themselves, working results might feed into content creation processes of communication output sometime later. One interviewee described the different non-communication-related responsibilities and duties during her workday as well as her specialisation in communication-related matters as follows:

"First of all, in the morning, I usually start with KA's diary. [...] I then make sure [that] each appointment needs to have either a background briefing on the person themselves or the stuff that KA's going to discuss. [...] I'll be writing a briefing[s] [for] KA [and] we'll be doing stuff like [...] writing questions that she then wants to raise in the chamber [...] I'd say probably, one to two speeches I need to write for her per week. [...] [W]e do have a constituency press officer in the constituency who deals with constituency stories. [...] I deal more with when there's a national topic that KA's working on, which is quite often." (Interviewee K, Interview on 27/08/2019)

The different activities, such as research for briefings, preparing questions for the chamber or writing speeches, can be done as a *group* or *team effort*, as indicated by K ("we'll be doing stuff like [...] writing questions"). Communication output that relies on *group*- or *team*-based work can hardly be understood as an ideal type of *solo effort*. Some interviewees highlighted that the communication officers' involvement in research-related tasks is purposeful, aiming to foster synergy effects by having the role of researcher and communication officer at the same time (see interviews with LA and S). Nonetheless, the extent to which communication officers are involved in activities which are not communication-related differs. The scarcity of resources, e.g., the small number of staff members and a high workload, also encourages flexible work arrangements for communication-related and non-communication tasks.

"It is a lot more flexible than probably it should be. Because we are quite small capacity-wise in comparison to the other parties we have, there's far less MSPs, so there's less money for staff, so there are less staff. So we do tend to have to be a bit more flexible when things come up and who has [the] capacity to be able to help with doing them [...] [T]here are times where [name of another staff member] would step in to help with the social media stuff. If A was doing a speech in the chamber and we needed live-tweeting and stuff clipped and [name of another staff member] was less busy than I was, that [...] gets passed between the two of us depending on capacity more than anything else." (Interviewee R, Interview on 22/08/2019)

While the interviewee emphasised that the lack of resources might be more constraining for smaller parties, the high workload and limitations regarding the number of staff members have been recurring in interviews. Interviewees also described communication and work patterns often as reactive. Even examples of proactive activities provided by interviewees were often reactive (see Chapter 10), limiting the offices' capacity for forward planning. Therefore, involvement in genuine pro-active activities, such as a long-term campaign on a selected policy, might be less common. The reactive nature and the high workload constitute an impediment to *teamwork*; instead, *group work* tends to be typically utilised and reactive tasks are allocated to staff members already familiar with them.

Reactive work patterns additionally increase the need for further flexibility. Interviewees hinted that flexible working patterns also encourage "on the job" training to broaden the operational capabilities of staff members. Throughout the different interviews, it has been highlighted that work is often shared based on workload and shifting demands in the various areas of the parliamentary office (e.g., casework, research for campaigns or upcoming legislation, and communication). The limited availability of staff members combined with situational personnel shortages, e.g. annual leave or illness, requires that staff members can cover unfamiliar areas. Proactively delegating and involving PAs in communication tasks also serves training purposes, which create additional capacities for fulfilling communication tasks within the office in the medium- and long-term.

"I think basically anyone who works for an MSP or MP are still able to do everything. [...] Even if there is somebody that primarily does comms, there will always be a day when they're not there [...] [Y]ou want people to be trained [...] I was looking for opportunities to try, and you know, pass around different parts of work to make sure people get opportunities to [train and collect experiences] [...]." (Interviewee D, Interview of 02/09/2019)

Beyond the circumstantial re-allocation and division of communication-related labour, whether due to training purposes or induced by situational peaks of workload, interviewed PAs of MPs and MSPs also described that communication-related duties might permanently be divided between several PAs. The division of communication-related tasks has been suggested by the type of media channel (e.g., social media, website or press), the reach of media outlets (e.g., local media and national media) or the type of content (e.g., specialisation in particular policy areas). These arrangements divide the role of the communication officer into several specialised communication officers. Because of their focus on a specific communication-related task (e.g., speech writing), those officers are less exposed to communication tasks than if an individual communication officer would conduct political communication. These arrangements are, therefore, to be classified as *group efforts*. Individual communication officers have, under those conditions, fewer opportunities to learn "on the job" in areas of political communication entrusted to other PAs. Reducing workload by delegating communication-related work to several PAs increases the individual communication officer's capacity to undertake tasks in different areas. Interviewee K described such a setting, outlining various non-communication-related tasks, such as doing research or preparing briefings for the parliamentarian.

Interviewees did not always provide the rationale behind dividing up the role of the communication officer into several positions in their parliamentary office. However, workload-related reasons have been given, and specialisations and experiences of available staff members have also been identified as drivers behind this division of labour, e.g., on essential subject matters (e.g. policy areas frequently featured in communication outputs) or (presumed) familiarity with communication platform (e.g., social media).

"As a young person, I often get trusted with the social media stuff [...] I would often make [...] suggestions on how to make these things better, how to communicate effectively [...] with the local people [...]." (Interviewee N, Interview on 30/09/2019)

Sometimes, the reasoning behind setting up these arrangements is unrelated to the communication officers' experiences and skills. It can also be caused by practical constraints of having different offices, e.g., an office in the Scottish Parliament and a constituency office in North East Scotland. One interviewee explained that the role of one communication officer is divided into two roles in their office, with one

communication officer based in Edinburgh for national media and one communication officer based in the constituency for local media. This has been done explicitly with the proximity to journalists from either national or local media outlets in mind. The interviewee, responsible for the national media output, highlighted that this would enable her to speak with journalists¹⁸ directly if necessary.

"I go directly to one journalist from one paper, who I know is going to write the story the way we want it to [...] they're all based in the parliament, which is handy because you can chat to them. You see them in the canteen. You see them in the garden lobby [...]." (Interviewee K, Interview on 27/08/2019)

The communication officer responsible for the local press was based in the constituency office in another part of Scotland, making it difficult for that PA to have this kind of personal, face-to-face contact with journalists from the national media. It would require the communication officer to limit his accessibility to journalists to impersonal means of communication like email, phone or virtual meetings. Another option would be to ask the communication officer to commute between the constituency office and the office in the parliament, which would require time and financial resources. However, the interviewee did not explicitly state why communication-related tasks were divided into local and national media.

While the interviewees' accounts indicate that communication-related tasks are undertaken by applying the division of labour, it is also apparent that these divided tasks are well integrated into the activities of the parliamentary office. The classification as *group work* is still justified since the approach of dividing the work and assigning areas over certain areas of communication tasks has been described in most cases. Considering the reactive nature of some communication-related tasks (see Chapter 10), such as media requests on short notice, this is quite important since it assigns accountability over a significant number of communication items to identifiable PAs. However, it must be noted that the integration contributes significantly to the communication output, which somewhat contributes to blurring the conceptual boundaries between *solo*, *group* and *team effort*. This blur might be one of the reasons interviewees tended to label their work very often as *teamwork*, even though their characterisation of communication-related tasks and responsibilities would have been better described as a *solo effort* or *group effort*. *Teamwork* as a permanent arrangement

¹⁸ Some journalists are directly based in the parliament, which makes it easier to have a face-to-face meeting with them.

for communication-related work has just been identified in one case. However, it also needs to be noted that time-limited, ad hoc *teamwork* arrangements are not unusual.

With reference to the discussion on mediatisation and professionalisation, those findings are significant. *Group* and *solo efforts* provide some degree of autonomy in creating communication output, which addresses a key feature of professionalism. This relative centralisation of communication-related responsibilities to designated PAs allows for their systematic and frequent exposure to tasks that help them acquire expertise and collect experience with media stakeholders (see Chapter 8 and Figure 9). Consequently, they also facilitate a mediatisation process since this learning-by-doing process helps PAs understand media stakeholders' expectations and their operating logic. Chapter 10 will show how this understanding is utilised to create communication output.

9.3 Shaping the Office: Preferences, Priorities, and (Inter-)Personal Approaches by Parliamentarians

The individual parliamentarian's preferences and priorities are essential in working arrangements for communication-related tasks. Interviewees explained that some of their parliamentarians tend to author their columns by themselves, although one or several PAs are usually assigned to handle the political communication of the office. Interviewees typically identified drivers such as a particular need for authenticity, personal interest in the subject, or the parliamentarian's priority for media and communication-related work.

"There is more than an element of I want the press release about that. I want to story about that; I want a brief about that. OA's a bit more... media is always at the back of her mind, whereas with UA [...] [it] was less so." (Interviewee U, Interview on 30/09/2019)

Direct involvement can also occur due to a very rigid signing-off process in which the communication output goes through rounds of substantial revisions, during which the parliamentarian can play a crucial role. Interviewee O explained that his parliamentarian would have a mixed approach to intervening in content creation by editing and authoring articles and columns by themselves.

"[...] it usually comes under as columns, and SA will write into the local newspapers and maybe once every [...] four of five weeks. A lot of that will come from her; perhaps it's something she's dealt with in the constituency [...] [or] perhaps it is something related to [her] portfolio [...] sometimes we will have

something to present to her, and she will heavily edit it [...] giving it her own style [...] [o]ther times she will have a document, she will give to us to edit and tidy up [...]. But it is probably 50/50, to be perfectly honest with you. Generally, it is a team effort [...]." (Interviewee O, Interview on 19/08/2019)

The involvement of the parliamentarian in the process can be understood as a means to exercise control over the communication output, as indicated in the previous chapter. However, it also has an organisational dimension of sharing labour and (pro)actively engaging in the content creation process. Under outlined circumstances of close interaction between PAs and MPs/MSPs, the content creation process qualifies as either a *group* or *team effort*, depending on the character of the interactions. Still, the notion of "heavy editing" indicates minimal individual accountability. The emphasis on providing a collective work result ("we will have something") reinforces the involvement of more than one person from the side of staff members. Both aspects are characteristics of a *team effort*, which the interviewee has also identified as the dominant work mode in cases of writing articles and columns for his parliamentarian.

Beyond personal involvement in content creation, the managerial component is equally important. Interviewees explained that the involvement of the parliament or the party in the relationship between MPs/MSPs and their employees would be rare. Parliamentarians can freely organise their offices and manage staff members according to their preferences within legal limits. Consequently, parliamentary offices are differently structured, and PAs will have to fulfil different roles and meet different expectations. Interviewee B, who works for two parliamentarians as a part-time communication officer, emphasised the significant differences. The interviewee described parliamentarian YA's office structure as hierarchical and highlighted that the office manager would assign communication tasks, leaving him minimal autonomy over his work. According to the interviewee, the parliamentary office of ZA would be characterised by a flat structure. However, this flat structure would occasionally translate into a "sort of too many cooks type approach: [...] me, ZA and these other two staffers [...] trying to decide the direction to go [...] that can take time that we don't necessarily have, which isn't an issue in YA's office [...]" (Interviewee B, Interview on 04/09/2019).

The differences in the office structures, determined and shaped by the parliamentarian, significantly impact the communication output and media management practices. For example, MPs or MSPs can designate the role of a communications officer to full-time

staff members (see, e.g., Interviewee A and M) or part-time PAs (see, e.g., Interviewee N, Interviewee L, and Interviewee I). Part-time staff members were often employed in two different parliamentarians' offices but not always with the same roles; for instance, Interviewee G was employed as VA's communication officer and researcher for WA. Full-time staff members often had duties beyond communication-related tasks (e.g., Interviewee D was the communication officer and office manager). In some instances, there has not been any role for a communication officer. Still, ad-hoc appointments were made on occurring communication-related tasks (see Interviewee CA). At the same time, other offices split the role of communication officer explicitly into several positions, whereby some of those roles were just part of the roles the PA had to fulfil (see, e.g., Interviewee K and N). Individual preferences of the MP or MSP, the perceived importance of tasks that need to be allocated, and the overall workload resulting from communication-related tasks have been mentioned in interviews, too. One parliamentarian explained that creating the role of a designated communication officer would be problematic in the context of his parliamentary office:

"[T]here is no particular delineation in responsibility [among my staff members apart from the appointed office manager], so I don't have anyone who works for me specifically in the area of communications. [...] [My staff members] will do various different elements of the role of being responsible to assisting me in my parliamentary responsibilities. [...] The workload wouldn't justify [to have a dedicated communication officer] [...] The main volume of work that comes to my constituency office [is case work]." (Interviewee CA, Interview on 06/06/2022)

Beyond the preferences and priorities of MPs or MSPs, parliamentarians' approaches to engaging with staff members as managers is another factor to be considered. One interviewee described problematic managerial decisions on contracts and recruitment practices and parliamentarians' lack of managerial experience. Additionally, interviewees have mentioned some parliamentarians' unprofessional or verbally aggressive behaviour towards their PAs (see, e.g., Interviewee V). While it is unclear how prevalent those incidents are, and the interviewee emphasised that this would concern a very limited number of parliamentarians only, there have been several reports on this type of behaviour in the last years in the UK parliament (see Independent Expert Panel, 2022, Standards, 2022, Wilkinson and Norfolk, 2019). Considering the importance of trust in the relationship between parliamentarians and their PAs (see Chapter 8), this behaviour is detrimental to a trust-based working relationship.

Arguably, this can also impact the workload and, with it, the communication processes, given that higher levels of trust are necessary for the parliamentarian not to use extensive, time-consuming control measures, such as strict sign-off procedures and requests for significant revisions of outgoing communication (see Chapter 8.1.2 and Figure 8). Moreover, this might also contribute to a higher staff turnover, which also increases the workload of the parliamentary office. The impact of increasing or shifting workload and staffing-related issues on the change of roles within the office has been noted by an interviewed communications manager.

"H started doing it as a researcher, and I took it all in, mainly to do with staffing issues; I've now gone back to doing a wee bit more casework, so I've now kind of shed the press release responsibility [...]." (Interviewee F, Interview on 23/08/2019)

Consequently, it can be concluded that the interpersonal approach of the parliamentarians themselves plays a substantial role in developing the office structure. While some approaches or office policies may result in tensions among staff members in the parliamentary office or between MPs or MSPs and their PAs, therefore creating a less stable work environment, a good workplace atmosphere promotes stability of the organisation and structure of the office. This has also been confirmed by interviewees who outlined that flexibility towards employees (see Interviewee LA) and a positive work environment would have contributed to a comparatively low staff turnover rate in their parliamentary offices (see Interviewee LA, Interviewee CA, Interviewee C).

"I have pretty limited turnover [...] the last person who worked for me, [...] who left [due to training somewhere else], [resigned] three years ago. [...] And now [the person] works for me again. Hopefully, that's an indication that I'm quite a good employer." (Interviewee CA, Interview on 06/06/2022)

The interaction between parliamentarians and PAs adds additional complexity when assessing whether the communication is a *solo*, *group*, or *team effort*. In cases of low trust and significant control measures applied by the parliamentarian (i.e. *Gatekeeper* approach, see Figure 8), *group efforts* and *solo efforts* are less likely since significant revisions of the communication output are usual. Under those conditions, PAs have less individual accountability and ownership but a high degree of interaction between PA and MP or MSP, characterising a *team effort*. This needs to be put in the context of the lifecycle of a parliamentary assistant proposed in Chapter 8 (see Figure 9): The higher the trust between parliamentarians and involved PAs, the fewer control measures are

applied and interferences by the MSP or MP undertaken. Consequently, *solo effort* and *group effort* arrangements with parliamentary assistants are more likely in the later stages of the lifecycle of their role as communication officers. This also reinforces the characterisation of this lifecycle as a process of professionalisation of political communication by PAs responsible for political communication. One of the critical requirements of being professional is autonomy (see Chapter 6.1), which is limited when political communication is approached as a team effort.

9.4 Who is in charge? Control in the Context of Groups, Teams and Solo Efforts

The relationship among staff members, including the communication officer(s), faces similar structural constraints as the relationships between parliamentarians and their communication officers. High workload, time pressure, limited available staff members, and scarce financial resources have been identified as significant. However, exposed to the same structural constraints, the organisational structures of parliamentary offices vary, although the mandate types do not seem to have any significant impact. When comparing the different arrangements, the guiding motif seems to be to complete arising tasks as efficiently and effectively as possible under each office's given circumstances based on the priorities and preferences of the individual parliamentarian. Perceived skills, experiences, and qualifications are used to allocate (flexible) areas of responsibility and may be adjusted depending on the ever-changing circumstances. While tasks and working areas are often separated, interviewees indicated that other staff members contribute in various ways, such as providing ideas and proofreading, which they often describe as a *team effort*. However, most tasks, particularly reactive communication output, such as responding to a media request, are usually undertaken by a designated person without the extensive involvement of other staff members.

Proactive communication output, in contrast to reactive communication output, e.g., during political campaigns, may require substantial help from other PAs. Whether this interplay of staff members in matters of work on communication output can be classified as *teamwork* depends on each office's circumstances and situational factors. While interviewees stressed that their work would usually not be a *solo effort* but *teamwork*-based, their description of communication-related activities very often does not meet the requirements of *teamwork*. However, while the different tasks within the

office are often separated, collaboration to varying degrees remains necessary. For instance, communication officers responsible for social media often use content of already existing press releases that other staff members might have written. Another example would be the common practice of MPs' and MSPs' offices to clip speeches of their parliamentarians, speeches typically written or co-produced by staff members containing key messages and then posted on social media. Those speeches are often not worked on by the person responsible for social media. In those instances, the communication effort cannot be characterised as a *solo effort*, but it could be either a *team* or a *group effort*, depending on the specific arrangements.

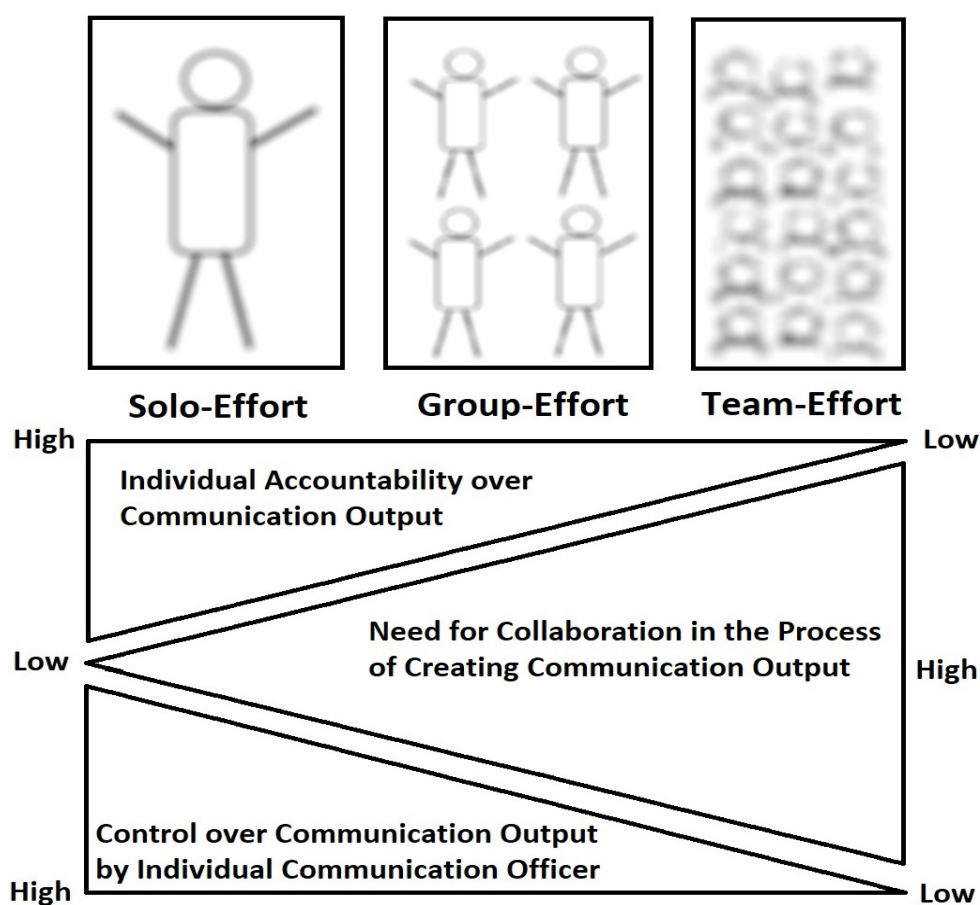


Figure 12 The varying degrees of Collaboration, Control over Communication Output and Individual Accountability among staff members in parliamentary offices by lateral structures, which either utilise *Solo Effort*, *Group Effort*, or *Team Effort* for their communication. (Source: Own Research)

Overall, there are three different types of arrangements for how offices structure communication-related tasks within the office: Communication can be organised as a *solo*, *group*, or *team effort*. It can be classified as a *solo effort* if one individual creates the most communication output. However, even in those instances, most parliamentary offices still require flexibility from these PAs, resulting in a minimum threshold for role

integration. Communication officers performing their role approximating a *solo effort* have a comparatively high degree of control of the content creation process, increasing their accountability over outgoing communication. Collaboration with other PAs and contributions by other staff members to the communication output is limited and often ad hoc. Communication as a *group effort* has been found in offices with a clear and fixed division of labour (e.g., national vs local, social media vs traditional media). The different areas of designated responsibility for creating content for outgoing communication usually have intersection points and require collaboration and coordination. In those cases, involved PAs are more interdependent from each other and require more interaction with each other compared to *solo effort* arrangements. However, this interdependence is limited by the compartmentalisation and separation of communication-related tasks. These arrangements are characterised by a high degree of individual accountability compared to *team efforts* and reduced control over the individually produced content compared to the *solo effort*. If external communication is approached as a *team effort*, it is usually characterised by flexible arrangements: communication-related tasks are assigned ad hoc depending on circumstances and situations. The content creation processes are collaborative: drafting, substantial revisions and edits involve several staff members. Under those conditions, the control of individual PAs over the communication output is usually minimal, in conjunction with joint accountability rather than individual accountability assigned to an individual PA (see Figure 12).

The degree of control an individual staff member can exercise needs to be understood in the context of the degree of integration of communication-related tasks into the parliamentary office. High degrees of integration and collaboration reduce the individual's control over the communication process and its output due to several staff members contributing substantially to the communication output. While structural constraints shape those arrangements, the setup of the office is decided by the individual parliamentarian considering these constraints. Consequently, parliamentarians, irrespective of their type of mandate (MP, MSP, list vs constituency), exercise control over the communication output in two ways:

1. Control is exercised directly through their working relations (incl. the setup of signing-off procedures) with the PAs drafting the communication output.

2. Control is indirectly exercised through recruitment, allocating roles and shaping the office structure, all of which determine PAs' individual accountability/mutual accountability over the communication output.

Indirectly exercised control also needs to be understood in how PAs are recruited. The last chapter has shown that trust is vital in the relationship between parliamentarians and communication officer(s). The importance of trust is not limited to the relationship between the MP or MSP and individual communication officers; it is relevant to all staff members of the office (see, e.g., Interviewee C, CA or Interview V). Trust in this context refers not just to the trust by the MP or MSP into the willingness and ability of staff members to put their efforts into helping the individual parliamentarians to advance politically and successfully pursue their re-election, but also trust in their political outlook, underlying values and work ethos (see, e.g., Interviewee CA, C, LA, V and S). Consequently, in parliamentary offices where communication-related tasks are approached as a *group* or *team effort*, clan control can also exercise effective control over the communication output.

The concept of *clan control* goes back to the research undertaken by Ouchi (1979, 1980). It refers to an informal control mechanism where *group* members or *team* members exercise control over each other, similar to a clan (Kirsch et al., 2010). This type of control is based on "a norm of reciprocity and the idea of legitimate authority [...] [and] social agreement on a broad range of values and beliefs" (Ouchi, 1979, p. 838) of the members of *groups*, *teams* and organisations in general. Consequently, a shared understanding of appropriate workplace behaviour and role fulfilment exists. This shared understanding creates expectations among *group* members and *team* members on proper workplace conduct and acceptable social behaviour (Ouchi, 1980). Upholding those shared values and meeting expectations are rewarded, but violations might lead to social sanctions by other members of the *group* or *team* (Kirsch et al., 2010). Considering that one of the prerequisites of employment as a PA is the applicant's commitment to the values, political outlook, and work ethos of the parliamentarian, a minimum of shared understanding towards work and role fulfilment in the parliamentary office by staff members can be presumed. While undertaking the external communication of the parliamentary office as a *solo effort* reduces the interaction and consequently removes the social foundation necessary to exercise *clan control*, organising the communication efforts as *group-* or *teamwork* facilitates and enables it.

Although it is unclear to what extent *clan control* is consciously utilised in those parliamentary offices, the emphasis on trust and the need to work together indicates that this form of self-control among staff members is at least indirectly encouraged. Consequently, clan control adds an additional layer of control for parliamentary offices, additionally to the outlined measures of control exercised directly by the parliamentarian (see Chapter 8).

9.5 Mediatisation, Professionalisation and Representation in the Context of Solo, Group and Team Effort

In the last chapter, it has been demonstrated that communication officers are usually relatively inexperienced at the beginning of their tenure but learn "on the job". Exposure to communication-related tasks is the foundation for this learning process and facilitates the individual professionalisation of the initially "unprofessional" communication officer. However, even communication officers who perform as a *solo effort* are often involved in other types of tasks. PAs are rarely employed solely to undertake communication-related tasks; PAs whose responsibilities within the office are limited to communication-related duties are usually part-time staff members. Consequently, the source for the learning process of most communication officers – undertaking communication-related tasks – is finite, especially considering those tasks compete with other non-communication tasks that might be prioritised.

In the context of *groups* and *teams*, this source for learning – working on communication-related tasks – is dispersed over several team members. The learning experience is, therefore, limited. In some offices, communication officers have fixed roles, but those roles usually concentrate on one or two specific areas (such as speechwriting, writing press releases, and social media). The individual responsible for those tasks might be able to learn and acquire experience in that area, but not far beyond, since exposure to other communication-related areas is restricted due to the intra-office division of labour. If the roles are not fixed but ad hoc, PAs might be exposed to various communication-related tasks unsystematically, irregularly, and potentially less frequently. Both ways of organising external communication impede the aforementioned learning process and limit the professionalisation of political communication of MPs and MSPs.

Collaboration, shared values, and a common purpose fostered by working in a *group* or a *team* can motivate and create a feeling of belonging. Interviewee W highlighted the unique experience of working in politics with people who share your ambitions, values and identity.

"There is a camaraderie and friendship amongst colleagues that simply doesn't exist in the private sector because you have the shared sense of endeavour. [...] You are doing something that really interests you, and on the side, you have bag-loads of fun with people who also support and believe in what you believe in. [...] I have friends now who we haven't worked together for a good few years, and these guys are still very good friends. Our friendships were forged in that environment." (Interviewee W, 17/05/2022)

On the other hand, a lack of ownership and control over the communication output has been identified as a source of frustration for individual PAs (see Interviewee W or Interviewee TA). The work in the "confines" of a *group* or a *team* significantly reduces ownership of individual PAs over the communication output and their control over the content creation process and can potentially offset the motivational advantages. The impact of parliamentarians on the workplace atmosphere of their respective offices also needs to be considered. The "sink or swim mentality" (Interviewee W) has been addressed in several interviews (e.g., concerning the lack of training and demand for flexibility). It can present a problem for PAs, particularly those struggling to adjust, undermining the sense of a shared mission. While it is unclear which type of experience dominates among PAs in the Scottish Parliament and the House of Commons, both have implications for the professionalisation process, and both have been found in MP's and MSP's parliamentary offices. If the working environment is stimulating and attractive through the feeling of a "shared endeavour", PAs might be more inclined to work in their role for longer. Even if PAs are less exposed to communication-related work due to the office's structure, they would have more time to acquire skills and experiences because of a longer tenure. In the case that the environment is less favourable, combined with reduced ownership and control, the tenure of the communication officer is likely to be shorter, limiting the learning process for PAs and the potential for professionalised political communication of the individual parliamentarians. This is particularly problematic considering that more experienced PAs could provide guidance and training for new entrants (see Interviewee D). However, the higher the staff turnover and the shorter the average "life span" of a communication officer in this environment, the fewer opportunities for training, mentoring and coaching experienced colleagues.

In the context of the mediatisation theory, these findings on opportunities and threats of organising the work in *teams* or *groups* are significant. PAs in *groups* and *teams* with a longer lifecycle, even if initially inexperienced, could acquire an understanding of the demands of the local press over time and adapt to their media logic. Under those circumstances, *teamwork* and *group work* would provide additional opportunities for improving and professionalising the political communication of the parliamentary office. The work of *groups* and *teams* would then be more coordinated and integrated than the *solo effort* of a communication officer within a parliamentary office: Activities of the *group* and *team* members, even if not primarily communication-related, could be better aligned and would more effectively feed into the undertaking of communication-related tasks. However, the lack of exposure to media logic due to the lack of initial experience by individual PAs, high staff turnover within the parliamentary office and infrequent (and limited) allocation of communication-related duties to PAs would make it more challenging to implement media logic in the activities of the parliamentary office.

The role of parliamentarians in those intra-office configurations can be understood as that of an actor in their own right and as a structural constraint for their staff members. While parliamentary offices, in general, encounter similar challenges (e.g., limited financial sources, high-stress environment), they react differently based on the setup and recruitment parliamentarians have undertaken based on their preference and priorities. Even with limited direct interference, the parliamentary office's communication output has been significantly shaped by the MP or MSP since it mirrors their preferences and priorities. However, given that most parliamentarians directly interfere through the sign-off procedure and input in content creation, the communication effort is rarely a *solo effort* undertaken by a single PA. Interestingly, no significant differences have been found between offices of MSPs, MPs or list and constituency MSPs.

While there is a high degree of mediation of the parliamentarian's communication and their creation as a public persona, the MPs and MSPs shape substantially any outgoing communication issued on their behalf. It can be argued that the *Doorman* approach significantly limits the parliamentarian's control over outgoing communication. Consequently, any communication released under these conditions is a *team*, *group* or *solo effort* of involved PAs, excluding the parliamentarian. However, the element of

trust and the parliamentarian's structural influence on their team must be considered when employing this argument. Preferences and priorities of the MPs and MSPs shape the structure and the organisation of the parliamentary office (e.g., by allocating roles and tasks as well as recruitment). Therefore, those priorities and preferences shape *group* and *team efforts* when producing work output (including outgoing communication). These preferences and priorities substantially impact the working results regardless of the direct involvement of the parliamentarian in producing those outputs and irrespective of the type of mandate the parliamentarian holds. Adding to the substantial impact of the parliamentarian on the structure and organisation of the parliamentary office, the decision to exercise less control over the communication process requires a high degree of trust by the MP or MSP towards the one(s) who produce the communication output, whether this is a *solo*, *group* or *team effort*. Crucially, trust refers to the authenticity of voicing the parliamentarians and their positions accurately in the content and style of the outgoing communication. The element of *clan control* within the office – particularly in the context of *group* and *team efforts* – provides an additional (informal) mechanism for safeguarding the authenticity of the communication output. Consequently, even with the comparatively limited control and involvement of the parliamentarian in the communication-related tasks, the communication outputs authentically represent the position and voice of the MP or MSP while still being substantially mediated.

10 Findings III – The Pursuit of Newsworthiness in Political Communication and the Management of Media Relations in the Practices of Parliamentary Assistants

The previous chapter identified several approaches to dividing and organising communication-related work in parliamentary offices: *solo*, *group*, and *team effort*. The approaches are based on different preferences and priorities of the individual parliamentarians reacting to structural pressures. These constraints are, in particular, the demands of a fast-paced and multi-task environment, with a limited means to address those. The individual parliamentarian's reaction to those external factors shapes how communication-related tasks are organised within the parliamentary offices of the Scottish Parliament and the House of Commons. The trust MPs and MSPs have in their staff members is another crucial determinant impacting how parliamentary assistants deal with and complete assigned communication duties. In low-trust relationships between them and their parliamentarian, the autonomy of the PAs is likely to be limited by the control measures of the MP or MSP. In those cases, the influence of the individual parliamentarian over the outgoing communication is expected to be higher, and the ownership over the communication output by the PA is lower. If a trusting relationship can be established, the autonomy of PAs to fulfil their (communication-related) tasks is higher. Consequently, in those circumstances, there are more opportunities for the communication officer to claim ownership over the communication output.

The previous chapters primarily focused on how parliamentary offices' internal relations shape their organisation of communication-related tasks and content creation processes. However, they did not focus on how communication is planned, managed and executed in the (daily) working practice of communication officers. The following chapter will address this question. In the literature review, it has been discussed that political communication has become increasingly professionalised by integrating methods and techniques from marketing and marketing communication, as well as the emergence of media logic challenging and replacing political logic in communication and campaigning matters. The last chapters have already demonstrated that these tendencies do not enjoy the same presence in the office arrangements and work relations where communication officers are embedded. Political logic is still a significant driver for parliamentarians when setting up and managing their offices or supervising their staff members. The apparent importance of political reasoning in those dealings has

consequences for the professionalisation processes of staff members trusted with political communication. Most interviewees explained that they had no formal qualification or direct experience related to their role as communicators; they learned "on the job" and often without systematic support from communication professionals. Additionally, the learning experience is limited by the multitude of non-communication-related tasks, which are part of their role, creating a relatively high workload. This needs to be understood in the context of most PAs having just recently graduated when they start their post and lack relevant working experience; thus, they face significant challenges without substantial support or guidance at the beginning of their job, also coined as "sink or swim"-culture (see, e.g., Interviewee W or Interviewee Z). Even when those obstacles have been overcome, parliamentary assistants usually have a relatively short tenure of six months to two years. This short time is not just due to the high-stress, low-pay working environment and limited opportunities for promotion. The opportunity to collect valuable skills and experience provides them on the labour market with more attractive working conditions than they can achieve in their role as PA, particularly if they have been in that role for a longer time.

"It almost comes as an epiphany moment, where you give so much of yourself for this role [...], and then something seemingly insignificant will happen, and you realise: *Actually [laughs], I don't need to do this anymore. I could now walk into a good job somewhere else which has far better pay and conditions, and it would give me greater job satisfaction.*" (Interviewee W, Interview on 17/05/2022)

While acquiring experiences and communication skills represent a process of professionalisation of the individual PA, this sentiment illustrates the limitations of their role. After developing skills and experiences, they become more attractive to other employers, incentivising them to leave their role as communication officers to MPs or MSPs. The professionalisation of political communication by parliamentary assistants based on learning-by-doing leads to a paradoxical situation. The increased professionalism of the communication officer incentivises their departure and leads to the de-professionalisation of political communication in the parliamentary office. The incentives for the departure are offered by potential employers in close proximity to the parliament (i.e. public affairs, lobby organisations, NGOs), and communication officers become more valuable in the labour market due to their accrued skills and experiences. After vacating the post, the professionalism of the political communication of the parliamentary office decreases, and the process of professionalisation with an initially

often inexperienced, new incumbent of the role of the communication officer starts anew (see also Figure 9 in Chapter 8.2). This situation is particularly prominent in parliamentary offices that centralise communication tasks.

"[...] It's nothing concrete [...] that triggers [that moment]. I know friends in a similar position [...] it's just one day [...] [you realise:] [...] *I'm not learning anymore [...] I've gotten as far as I can in this environment*, and you leave quickly. And you are not replaced like for like. You are replaced again with a person you were [at the beginning, who] doesn't have much experience." (Interviewee W, Interview on 17/05/2022)

Parliamentary offices utilising *teams* or *groups* to complete communication-related tasks can avoid the sudden loss of expertise by a communication officer vacating their post. However, the decentralisation of task fulfilment also constrains the professionalisation of political communication in these parliamentary offices. First, the dispersion of communication-related duties means that the individual PAs who are entrusted with those tasks encounter communication-related assignments less often and, therefore, acquire fewer experiences in solving those tasks than communication officers who are embedded in a *solo effort* approach to communication. The professionalisation process might not be severely disrupted by individual PAs leaving the office. Still, it is slowed down by the limited exposure of the individual PAs to those communication tasks. Second, there has been no indication in the interviews that organising the communication tasks as a *group* or *team effort* impacts staff turnover. Consequently, there is also a loss of acquired experiences and skills due to PAs looking for new career opportunities. In summary, the process of professionalisation is usually limited in parliamentary efforts, irrespective of whether communication tasks are approached as a *solo effort*, a *group effort*, or a *team effort*.

This findings chapter explores how these communication tasks are approached from the perspective of PAs as communication practitioners. The aforementioned limited professionalisation processes and the structural constraints (i.e. workload) provide the context in which communication processes are initiated, planned, managed and executed. This context, in part, explains how those processes are shaped. Interviewees described the content creation process often, either explicitly or implicitly, as reactive. The broader approach to political communication was often characterised in a way that can be described as dominated by tactical decisions rather than being aligned with a concise, overarching strategy. However, interviewees indicated that content creation

aims to address the needs of media and other public stakeholders by providing newsworthy content in their communication output (i.e. press releases). This approach can be understood as an attempt to utilise media logic, indicating the significance of the mediatisation of political communication of parliamentary offices. Consequently, the approaches PAs use towards content and presentation of the communication output and their handling of media relations are best understood through the analytical lens of news values. Parliamentary offices aim to overcome the challenges of reaching a larger audience in targeted constituencies through local and social media by trying to create newsworthy communication output. Therefore, this output usually addresses news values of *proximity*, *impact/magnitude*, *timeliness*, *prominence*, *power elite*, *exclusivity*, *human interest*, *shareability* and *audio-visuals*. Which of those values is more prevalent in the content depends on the circumstances and the characteristics of the parliamentarian.

Another important finding is the impact of choosing to shadow constituencies by list MSPs of bigger parties. This approach re-emphasises the existing tendency to address proximity in communication output (e.g., press releases). It also prevents conflicts with other list MSPs of the same party by avoiding targeting the same constituency in their communication. Consequently, the communication approach among members of PPGs of bigger parties is best described as a *group effort* emphasising the pursuit of the personal vote in political communication by PAs. The strict separation of responsibilities through territorial division is also mirrored in the relationship between parliamentary offices and PPG's press units. At large, MSPs' (from SNP, Labour and Conservatives) and MPs' offices do not differ in their approach in that regard.

In contrast, smaller parties have been identified as more collaborative among the PPG members and between parliamentary offices and PPG press units. The size of small PPGs and their lack of resources incentivises an approach to political communication as a *team* rather than a *group*. This inclination for collaboration and joint effort in communication matters has also been indicated by interviewees who were working for the Liberal Democrats in the House of Commons. However, the sample of interviewed PAs who have had working experience for MPs of the Liberal Democrats is relatively small, which is why this finding needs to be approached with caution.

Overall, those different approaches by smaller and larger PPGs show that parliamentary offices of MPs and MSPs alike have a strategic element in their decision-making

towards political communication. Both aim to address media needs by creating newsworthy content; the differences result from the varying capacities of parliamentarians to reach a wider audience. The attempt to meet the expectations of media stakeholders when creating communication output confirms the mediatisation and professionalisation tendencies identified in the literature. Another important finding is the shared experience of the growing importance of social media for parliamentary offices' political communication among the majority of interviewed PAs, irrespective of the type of mandate their parliamentarian holds. All interviewees confirmed that they utilise platforms such as Twitter or Facebook for their communication efforts. Still, most of them also explained that MSPs' and MPs' parliamentary offices use social media as a channel of communication for broadcasting messages rather than directly, interactively engaging with a broader audience.

The following sections will utilise the analytical framework outlined in Chapter 6.4 and present and explain the findings in detail. It will discuss how much news values are utilised in creating political communication and managing media relations. This chapter will also investigate whether communication approaches are proactive, reactive, strategic or tactical. After that, the collaboration between parliamentary offices and the pursuit of personal and party votes will be evaluated. The subsequent Chapter 11 will connect the findings presented in this chapter and Chapters 8 and 9. It will address the outlined research questions and characterise how communication is approached and planned, as well as what role PAs play in those communication efforts. This discussion will evaluate how these findings fit in the broader context of the scholarly debates on professionalisation and mediatisation.

10.1 Strategy and Collaboration in the Pursuit of Creating Newsworthy Content

10.1.1 Being Strategic and Proactive: Mimicking Constituency MSPs

Interviewees from all parties working, irrespective of the type of mandate of their parliamentarian (MSPs with list or constituency mandate or MPs), confirmed that they primarily seek to increase the salience and public exposure of their parliamentarian through their communication efforts. Closely related to this goal is the attempt to connect the public profile of the individual parliamentarian with policies, campaigns or issues of local relevance. The connection between both aims is established by the influence of advancements in achieving one of these aims, which shapes the perceived

chance of success in reaching the other. However, MSPs are placed differently to position themselves successfully on local matters depending on whether they have a list or constituency mandate. Interviewee A, who worked for a list MSP at the time, described his employer's positioning on local issues compared to constituency MSPs as follows:

"I think for constituency MSPs, there [is] probably [...] slightly less of an [...] issues-based strategy because obviously, they are just looking to be visible within their constituency [...] As a list MSP, you can't be on top of everything because you are covering so many constituencies, but also, you'll find that constituency MSPs will suck out a lot of local issues for themselves. [...] it tends to be the kind of more issues-based stuff [what we focus on]. It is the best way to raise your profile [...] within the region." (Interviewee A, Interview on 16/08/2019)

Similar accounts have been provided by other interviewed PAs who worked for list MSPs. Interviewees highlighted that list MSPs would be in a more disadvantageous position to voice their views on local matters in local media since constituency MSPs would often be the ones journalists prioritise to comment on them. However, interviewees from the Scottish Labour Party explained the shadowing practices of list MSPs, which interviewees from the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party have also described:

"So, if you take [my] region [...], we had one constituency seat in [name of constituency], but there are another [number of] seats in the region that needed to be covered, and we had [low number of list] MSPs to cover the region. So, we had a written agreement about which constituencies those MSPs would cover for [...] casework. [...] But we would also agree which seat we would put the most amount of effort into, so although I looked at [number of] seats, [we were] working very heavily in one of them, quite heavily in the second as a sort of backup, the other[s] [...] did the bare minimum in." (Interviewee C, Interview on 02/10/2019)

The reasoning behind dividing an electoral region among the list MSPs of one party is two-fold. It has been described as a matter of practicality since some of the electoral regions cover a large area; dividing up a region would make it easier to manage the casework. One interviewee described this situation rather vividly:

"It's crazy, it's absolutely crazy, with the best [will] in the world, you're just not going to be able to do that, and I think there's a quick realisation that look, don't try, it's not through choice, but there's no point in stretching yourselves just then that you end up not helping anyone." (Interviewee Q, Interview on 10/09/2019)

As a consequence, the communication practices of MPs and MSPs of larger parties are alike but somewhat differ in their ability to access local media when comparing

communication officers working for list MSPs to constituency MSPs or MPs. The logic behind the described practice aims, in all cases, towards positioning for the next elections. Dividing up the region makes it easier for list MSPs to build up a local profile in these constituencies to be better placed in future elections to challenge constituency-mandated incumbents. Interviewee S emphasised that it was one of the objectives of their efforts that their list MSP was seen as a *de facto* constituency parliamentarian. However, S also highlighted the difference in requirements for being well-positioned on the party list compared to a constituency candidate. The difference would be due to the different electorates in the candidate selection process: Personal relations would be more helpful for becoming a constituency candidate while being present in national and regional media would be more helpful for the regional selection process. Although the list MSPs of bigger parties have been described as aiming for constituency mandates, they are often going for a dual candidacy and aim to be well placed on the party list.

The interviewees' explanations address several points mentioned in the previous section. There is a significant effort to create a local connection, which is considered more practical for their casework and favourable for the upcoming elections. The drive to be perceived as "local" eases access to local media by making the positions and statements of the MSP more relevant to the area. It addresses, in particular, the news value of *proximity*, which is particularly important when competing with other list MSPs and the constituency MSP for media attention. It also carries the element of strategy and proactivity. It is proactive since electoral regions are divided at the beginning of the term in anticipation of future elections and upcoming workloads. It is also strategic since it is intentional and aims to shape the communication and campaigning environment to improve electoral prospects. In addition, there is an attempt to implement this strategy through tactics to strengthen the local connection, for example, focusing on very local issues and campaigns, prioritising casework from the targeted constituency and showing a presence in local businesses and organisations in that region.

"We do press releases in a whole lot of areas [...] giving reference to [...] constituency work you know [...] an example is [...] if [name of MSP] has a visited a local charity or a local housing association, there will be that emphasis on [name of MSP] visiting [and] learning about what happens at this particular organisation." (Interviewee F, Interview on 23/08/2019)

Beyond being a strategy for proactively limiting casework workload and supporting campaigning and communication activities, it also can be understood as a measure to

reduce tensions and conflicts among regional MSPs. Potential problems caused by party-internal conflicts or diverging interests among MSPs from the same party have also been addressed in several interviews (see, e.g. Interviewee Z4, Interviewee S). Putting an agreement in place prevents regional MSPs from the same party "to step [on] other people's toes" (Interviewee Z2, Interview on 21/08/2019). It helps to avoid party-internal conflicts between list MSPs targeting the same constituencies and competing over local media access (see, e.g. Interviewee Y, Interviewee F, Interviewee Z4), which is not a consideration among communication practitioners working for MPs due to the absence of regional mandates. Minimising the potential for political conflicts among MSPs of the same party, which could become a newsworthy event themselves, reinforces the interpretation, as mentioned earlier, of the approach as strategic and proactive. It also illustrates the importance of personal-vote-seeking behaviour since this approach allows list MSPs to build up local visibility and a local profile. For MPs as well as constituency MSPs, the avoidance of conflict with other parliamentarians of their PPG also plays a role, but more in general terms, which equally affects list MSPs (e.g., conflicts on national policies or developments affecting several constituencies at the same time).

The strategy of dividing up electoral regions also addresses the question of to what extent parliamentary offices are willing to participate in a joint effort on their political communication. PAs of bigger political parties (SNP, Scottish Labour and Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party) are usually less involved in *team efforts* with other offices in their political communication. The reason for this is the vertical and horizontal division of labour: National campaigns and targeting national media (British or Scottish national media) are usually PPG press units' responsibility. Working with local media and undertaking local campaigns are the responsibility of MSPs and MPs. While there are exceptions for interactions with national media by MSPs and MPs, this vertical division of labour allocates clear responsibilities to the parliamentary offices and reduces the need for interaction. The horizontal division of labour for the list MSPs is done by dividing up electoral regions and respecting the newly drawn borders (also including the areas of constituency parliamentarians of the own party). Those divisions indicate a *group effort* towards communication: There is increased accountability towards individual communication output, minimal collaboration and a somewhat competitive relationship among list MSPs, which is characterised by the attempt to

prevent conflicts due to competing in the same locations. However, approaching political communication as a *group effort* has not been as pronounced in small parties (Scottish Liberal Democrats and Scottish Green Party), which show increased interaction and characteristics of a *team effort* in their political communication. While there is an indication that this is very similar for parliamentary offices in the House of Commons, the relatively small sub-sample requires caution.

10.1.2 Overcoming Limitations of Being Small: Team Efforts of Small Parties

Interviewed participants from smaller parties described a different quality of interaction among parliamentary offices. It also needs to be noted that these differences seemed to have been independent of the type of mandate of the individual MP or MSP. This is quite significant regarding the situation in the Scottish Parliament since the two small parties differ in their proportion of constituency parliamentarians compared to the list parliamentarians. The Scottish Greens did not have a constituency MSP; all their parliamentarians were list-based. The Scottish Liberal Democrats, however, had four MSPs who were elected in constituencies and just one list-based parliamentarian.¹⁹ This is quite significant since it emphasises the overriding importance of the parliamentary party group (PPG) compared to the influence of mandate types when members of the PPG are to decide on whether and to what extent they wish to collaborate between their parliamentary offices on matters of political communication.

Interviewees from smaller parties described the interactions among staff members of parliamentary offices of the same PPG and between these offices and their PPG press units as more integrated. One interviewee described the interactions between PAs and MSPs of the PPG as closer, with small-scale events (e.g., pub nights, birthday cakes), which makes them feel more valued rather than being a "number" (see Interviewee Z5). This description is mirrored in the accounts on collaboration between offices. One interviewee, employed as a part-time staff member by two different MSPs, explained that the working arrangements are set up purposefully to foster synergy effects for both offices (see Interviewee Z6).

"We have a small team, but we try to coordinate as much as possible [...] for instance [...] if I am doing a freedom of information request and I get a response

¹⁹ The contrast between those parties list/constituency-based MSP ratios became even more pronounced in the elections for the Scottish Parliament in 2021. While the Scottish Liberal Democrats lost the list-based mandate but kept four constituency mandates, the Scottish Greens increased the number of list-based mandates but remained without constituency MSP.

in particularly relevant to an area or a constituency that was covered by one of the other MSPs, I will share that. I always share that information with one of their researchers so they can use it for a local story. *[Interviewer: "[...] Is it more a by-product that you say, okay, well, this is also relevant for you? Or is it also that you have..."]* ... [Interviewee confirming:] [I have those] things in mind beforehand." (Interviewee Z6, Interview on 22/08/2019)

However, another interviewee from a small party with similar working arrangements did not emphasise being a link or a collaborative element. While flexibility in how work hours are divided has been mentioned in this interview, that particular case demonstrates a more pronounced differentiation between both working environments. This manifests in the case of small-sized PPGs in an overall increased interaction among the parliamentary offices of the PPG compared to medium and large PPGs. However, this might not be as clear and distinct in every case. Consequently, similarly to Chapter 9, the distinction between *group* and *team* is better understood as a matter of degree.

Several examples can illustrate the increased collaboration. Interviewees from the Scottish Liberal Democrats described a project undertaken in the run-up to the Christmas break. PAs of the different offices would meet and brainstorm ideas for stories which could be put in press releases. Two interviewees confirmed that only a few proposals result in outgoing communication outputs. The ideas require significant preparation time, such as submission of freedom-of-information requests (FOIs).

"[T]ypically, we would have a meeting in maybe mid-October [...] [with] the MSPs' assistants and the head of policy and the press unit, and we [...] brainstorm maybe 40 or 50 ideas for stories we could do. Some of them will be based on ongoing campaigns. Some [...] will be based on just areas that are interesting to the MSP. Some of them will be based on just a staffer having a brilliant idea. And then we will put in a bunch [...] of parliamentary questions or freedom of information requests [...]. You get a relatively low hit rate. So, you put in quite a lot and [...] see what comes back and what's interesting. [...] We need [...] between a dozen and 15 stories that come good." (Interviewee Z7, Interview on 10/08/2019)

Those press releases will be sent to different media outlets with embargo dates for each release. Journalists may struggle to find interesting content for their outlets over the understaffed Christmas period. They can use these stories and plan well in advance with the content, decreasing their workload and providing suitable, readily written texts.

"It depends a lot on how good the research is, how good the team is that's doing it [...]. It works extremely well because the journalists want to go home for Christmas [...]. They've got, you know, 15 pages of print that they can cut and

paste into the[ir] paper. That will save [them] [...] two or three days [of] work."
(Interviewee D, 02/09/2019)

One interviewee noted that the subject of these proposals usually addresses policy portfolios considered particularly relevant. The PPGs' specialisation in particular policy areas for political communication is another difference between small and medium or large parties in the Scottish Parliament. The reason behind focusing on a few areas and campaigns rather than a broader range is to build up expertise and credibility with media stakeholders under the constraints of limited resources.

"[W]e just don't have the resources [...] [a]nd sometimes, that means we have to pick and choose our battles. We can't do the running in the media on every single topic that comes up. [...] So, we've built up [...] a degree of speciality [is] in it and, from a media perspective, a degree of credibility now where if we put a story out on [specialised issue], journalists will listen. They'll put us at the top of a story because we've done that story for a while and built up credibility."
(Interviewee Z7, 10/07/2019)

However, there are also differences to be noted: Scottish Greens widened their spectrum of topics over time following an increase in the number of MSPs and supporting the minority SNP government after the 2016 election in Scotland. The latter also increased media interaction, given the increased influence of the Scottish Greens in the policy-making process (see Interviewee Z8's description of developments during the time working in parliament, Interview on 05/03/2021).

Interviewees of MSPs and MPs from small-sized PPGs described the relations among the parliamentary offices as more forthcoming and less competitive, even in day-to-day political communication. While "avoiding stepping on peoples' toes" was a common theme in interviews with PAs from mid-sized and large parties, interviewees from small parties have not featured the rather strict and almost territorial framing in their accounts. One interviewee described a situation as collegial, flexible and accommodating, for example, in responses to media requests. Although policy portfolio designations are usual in all PPGs, irrespective of their size in the Scottish Parliament and the House of Commons, interviewees from bigger parties differed in their accounts of how these arrangements are managed. They described fixed designations of portfolio responsibilities with little flexibility. Interviewee Z5 illustrated the more flexible handling of these arrangements in a small-sized PPG, reinforcing the understanding that small parties are more collaborative and more inclined to engage in teamwork in political communication.

"We've had a couple of times where issues that certain MSPs have been working on a lot, things have developed, but because they're uncontactable because they're either on annual leave or they're in a part of the region where they don't get signal [...] the quote will come from whichever MSP we can get a hold of." (Interviewee Z5, 22/08/2019)

Overall, small parties in the Scottish Parliament feature elements of a strategic approach to communication. The focus on specific policy portfolios and the encouraged collaboration among the parliamentary offices of the PPG members intend to influence the communication environment. While similar tendencies have been described by interviewees who were based in the House of Commons, it remains somewhat unclear to what extent the behaviour is mirrored among MPs. The approach pursued by small-sized PPGs in the Scottish Parliament addresses the news value of *relevance* by increasing the perceived credibility and expertise of their statements concerning those policy areas by media stakeholders. Additionally, the flexibility of approaching communication as a joint effort helps maintain the *timeliness* of releases and statements by reacting fast and without too much delay to suddenly emerging media-relevant events. *Timeliness* and *relevance* are also addressed in their communication tactics, such as the initially described "Christmas package", which is approached as a proactive joint effort. However, the strategy of specialisation and *teamwork* is best understood as a reaction to the circumstances. Interviewees explained that the key driver behind this approach is the lack of resources, especially compared to bigger parties. Concerning the debate on party-vote and personal-vote-seeking behaviour, this reactive communication effort emphasises party-vote. Due to the encouraged *teamwork*, the "personal element" in their political communication is more diluted than in bigger parties, which show less flexibility and a more pronounced division of communicative labour.

10.2 How to reach your audience? Everyday struggles and varying capacities to respond

In the interviews, two dividing lines impacting the political communication of parliamentarians emerged from the parliamentary context: PPG size and mandate types (i.e. list vs constituency mandates among MSPs). While these structural factors shape the interactions among parliamentary offices, other factors inherent to the incumbent of the mandate and their PAs are equally important. Particularly relevant factors are the parliamentarian's tenure and position within the PPG (e.g. if the person is a member of the shadow cabinet) and the experience and expertise of the PA(s) responsible for

communication. Independent of the diverging quality of these features among parliamentary offices of MPs and MSPs, all of them are impacted by the fast pace and the lack of predictability of the general political environment.

Interviewees indicated that long-standing parliamentarians could, throughout their tenure, build a network of contacts with relevant journalists from local and national media outlets. Additionally, being a member of the shadow cabinet or having an important role within the party, especially if the parliamentarian belongs to one of the larger opposition parties in the Scottish Parliament and the House of Commons, can also be a resource to increase the parliamentarian's media exposure. Scottish national media outlets will be more willing to consider them and their views in the news coverage, especially if the politician has a good reputation for providing credible and relevant access to information. One illustrative example is the account of Interviewee K, who described the relationship between journalists and one of these frontbench opposition politicians (in the Scottish Parliament) with a long tenure as follows:

"KA's [...] hugely respected within the press lobby because [KA] has been an MSP for the last [...] years, and [...] if she's going to give you a quote, it's because what she's saying is worth saying. If she's going to discuss anything off the record [...] [KA] is not going to lead you down the garden path. So journalists don't have an issue working with [KA] and [...] there's not a single journalist in that lobby who would get a phone call saying, *Hi, it's [KA]* and not know who it was. And not know that that was a good story that they were going to get." (Interviewee K, 27/08/2019)

At the same time, newly elected backbenchers will find it challenging to make their voices heard. For local media, constituency parliamentarians have an advantage over list MSPs, which is one of the reasons for the employed shadowing practices by the Scottish Labour Party and the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party. Interviewee A, tasked with communication responsibilities for a newly elected list MSP, explained the situation when dealing with journalists.

"BA [...] was elected [in] 2016, which means you're essentially starting from zero. [...] I think [...] there is definitely a difference between a list MSP and [a] constituency MSP. [...] As a list MSP, you can't be on top of everything because you are covering so many constituencies, but also, you'll find that constituency MSPs will suck out a lot of local issues for themselves, whether they're of your party or not. [...] [A]nd then again, the kind of difference between [...] more senior MSPs and less senior MSPs. [...] [The] longer serving MSPs [...] had more of an opportunity to build relationships with the press, and the press, to some extent, see them as more of a known quantity [...] [they] go to them first [...]." (Interviewee A, Interview on 26/08/2019)

Interviewee A also explained that the chosen political communication approach focuses on issues affecting the electoral region rather than a specific constituency. Other interviewees diverged from this by emphasising the focus on particular parts of the electoral region and specific locations (e.g., Interviewee S or Interviewee L). Being closely connected to one constituency, beyond the shadowing practice, e.g., by having served as a constituency MSP and building relations with journalists in the past, eases access to local media even if the parliament is re-entered through the party list.

"AA is now responsible for a much, much bigger area, but there are [several] list members in our party for that area. So, to make it more manageable, we split up the area to be able to manage it [...] it goes beyond [AA's former constituency]. It covers the other areas. [...] [for t]he local papers you have, you've got the same journalists that have been there for a long time. So, there has been a relationship built up over time." (Interviewee Z3, Interview on 05/09/2019)

Interviewees varied in their explanations of selecting topics and managing media relations. Most commonly, they described monitoring practices for local and regional media. They explained that they would regularly and frequently acquire local newspapers to identify suitable topics they could address, e.g., in press releases, and monitor to what extent local journalists have picked up outgoing communication and covered their parliamentarians. Press releases usually feature a prominently placed statement from the MSP or MP, with the aim that these quotes are picked up in press coverage. However, some PAs explained that they attempt to write a press release in the style of a newspaper article so that large parts or even the whole release is published in local media outlets (see, e.g., Interviewee L or Interviewee D). The use of press releases and PR material for news reporting by journalists has been subject to considerable debate (see, e.g., Louw, 2010, Lewis et al., 2008).

Unsurprisingly, PAs who incorporate this in their approach to addressing media stakeholders were often more experienced, e.g., had a longer tenure in their role or journalistic experiences. Interviewees generally highlighted the importance of *timeliness* in their responses to media requests and observing submission deadlines of local media outlets. However, their accounts differed in their suggested approaches to managing media contacts. Some interviewees described a basic working relationship with journalists with limited contact by email for the distribution of press releases or responses to media requests (see, e.g., Interviewee A or Interviewee P). Others indicated

that they, or their parliamentary, would aim to have regular meetings and seek a more personal relationship.

"Every now and again [...] there will be drinks, usually on a Thursday night. Our conferences, that's [...] where a lot of that networking happens just because everybody is in the same place. WA will go out for lunch or coffees with journalists, and he will have separate face-to-face meetings every now and again; in terms of the staff in WA's office, it's all done over the phone. [...] So, maintain a relationship; if you speak to them a couple of times a week, then you know you tell them what's coming up. They're grateful because they've got content [...] they know [...] they don't have to rewrite." (Interviewee X, Interview on 16/08/2020)

The majority of interviewees also regularly highlighted that they would identify journalists who were more sympathetic to their party or political cause and seek to utilise those relationships to position their MP or MSP or their parliamentarians' political campaigns well in the local news coverage. An instrument for maintaining those more favourable relationships, frequently mentioned by interviewees, was to provide exclusives. Interviewee E provides an interesting account of how their parliamentary office utilises this tool:

"With the [exclusives], [...] to use the example of the letter to [the home secretary] that was something we felt had enough [...] mileage that we could send out [...] to all contacts. With something like, [...] the [particular policy issue] or something more specific developments say in the discussion around [particular policy proposal] in [city A], that is where [...] the relationship between you and a journalist [...] comes to the floor. Because [...] if you have developed the relationship with someone and you are helping each other, you can strengthen that relationship further by giving them [exclusives]. So you can [...] use an exclusive [...] or giving it to [the specific journalist] today; we are giving it to [other media contacts] tomorrow. *[Interviewer intervenes: So you [use an] embargo?]* yeah, so it is just a way of keeping them on their toes. And you get a lot back for that as well. Because we have found [...] that journalists will come to us with something and they will say, *you know this isn't for, this isn't for sending around or this [...] just for your eyes only.* [...] You can see the reciprocity [...]. [An e]xclusive [...] is an interesting tool we do use it [...]." (Interviewee E, Interview on 03/09/2019)

Interviewed PAs also varied in their accounts in terms of the extent to which they targeted particular local newspapers. Interviewee A explained that the preferred way of distributing press releases would be mailing lists in which the same releases are sent to different media contacts. The reasoning behind this approach was that "if one paper doesn't pick it up, another one will" (Interviewee A, Interview on 26/08/2019).

However, Interviewee B suggested that in some cases, the press releases need to be tailored to the individual profile of the local paper:

"I am much more strict on making sure, for the [Outlet A], in particular. They are incredibly localised. Like everything has to be [Area A] centric. So, I always make sure I put [Area A] in the topline of that, somewhere." (Interviewee B, Interview on 04/09/2019)

Both approaches aim to maximise the reach of the communication output, but their tactics differ. Interviewee A's argument follows the underlying assumption that the content is already newsworthy and that distributing it to as many contacts as possible (i.e. journalists with a connection to the featured issue) increases the chance of their content being picked up by local media outlets. Interviewee B's argument points towards the importance of *relevance* and *proximity*, which can be achieved by adjusting the content to increase its newsworthiness. Both approaches agree that the content needs a local connection (*proximity*) and *relevance*; they recognise the need to produce newsworthy content by addressing news values. The disagreement is on the extent and degree of fulfilment of these news values to successfully place the produced content in local media outlets.

Interviewed PAs working for MPs or MSPs regularly mentioned two other tools to increase the receptiveness of journalists for providing communication output: media events and visual material. The latter is not just limited to pictures from local visits or campaigning activities of the parliamentarian but can also include meetings with local politicians, especially if they are from the same party. The involvement of PAs in party-political activities during their work time is not allowed. However, opportunities may arise where produced communication output illustrates the parliamentarian's activities within the legal constraints that can also help politicians from the same party as the parliamentarian. Interviewee D illustrates how the inclusion of associated politicians can be facilitated within the legal boundaries:

"We have to be quite careful in what we do. [...] We still do political press releases, but we are not allowed to just go and do campaigning or press releases for councillors or other candidates, but what you can do is to tie loose things together in a way that makes UA the front runner in that campaign, but he'll be alongside maybe councillors or other people like that. [...] Let's say that you've got, you know, a council campaign where your local council group is doing something on education for local schools [...] and UA is also doing a campaign, like that [...] then you would tie loose ends together [...]. There is a very grey area [...] but without [...] trying to cross too many lines. [...] You are looking to

get not just UA [...] but your councillors [...]. But, you are promoting them by nature, by just having their name on the press release [...]" (Interviewee D, Interview on 02/09/2019)

The mentioned media events have usually been identified as a communication tool deployed during parliamentarians' campaigns. MPs and MSPs alike usually conduct a few campaigns on particular policies or locally relevant issues throughout their term, typically promoted with key stakeholders (such as journalists, constituents, and local party members). While campaigns on policy issues are usually of local relevance, there have been several examples where they addressed a broader issue on the regional or national level (see, e.g., Interviewees A and E). Regularly mentioned types of events include press conferences and visits to locations of particular importance or symbolic relevance to the campaign.

"They focus on particular issues. Let's say drug use [...] they focus on that, and because they want to increase the reach, they have particular events. [...] For example, a tour through all places where you see drugs [...] and [...] invite journalists, and they put something out on social media on that." (Interviewee P, Interview on 16/09/2019)

Media events usually require proactive planning, given that they are used as tools in campaigns that run over an extended period, whereby short-term and reactive utilisation is equally possible – for example, as a reaction to a crisis. Those events can be both tactical and strategic by nature. They are a tactic when situations that either suddenly emerge or whose emergence is foreseeable are utilised to achieve a political goal, such as re-election or realising a particular policy. Media events as a strategy require that situations used to draw journalists to those sights are created by parliamentary offices and used to promote their political goals. Interviewee F explained through an example the rationale and the planning of this kind of event:

"[L]ast year we had a press conference that was based in the parliament, and that involved a few of the [victims of policy related issue] coming along; basically it was centred on a [expert] who is kind of world leading in [...] which often would in many cases [provide help to these victims], but he's based in US and [...] we still are trying to get this [person] to come over to Scotland to [help us] over here [...], there's been a lot of resistance from the Scottish government, so we organised a press conference in the parliament, and then [...] both [colleague from the parliamentary office], and I worked on a briefing that we'd sent out to MSPs [...] I'll collate all of the information, and then obviously we wanted to make a big thing of it, so it was on the news, we had to make sure that it's not just about promoting, it's about making sure that people come along to the debate, people engaging the debate, people also- people are watching the news, and

they're coming along and engaging [...]." (Interviewee F, Interview on 23/08/2019)

This illustrates how different news values are addressed. The described event took place in the Scottish Parliament, embodying the news values of *political elite* and *impact/magnitude*. Inviting persons directly affected by the policy addresses *human interest* since it personalises and emotionalises the political issue. Additionally, it provides the opportunity to take pictures and produce *audio-visual material*, increasing the event's newsworthiness. The use of *audio-visuals* and pictures has been described in most interviewed PAs as a critical component of outgoing communication (e.g., for press releases or social media posts).

Other instruments to create more reach for their communication output are FOIs, speeches (especially those that are made in the House of Commons or the Scottish Parliament), letters to ministers, and emerging local issues. Sources for information on issues to address can be local media, experiences in surgeries and caseworkers from the parliamentary office. Caseworkers of MPs and MSPs are the first point of contact for constituents, and if specific issues are addressed several times, they might be forwarded to the PA responsible for communication since it would provide an opportunity for external communication. Letters to ministers and FOIs can also provide content for press releases; depending on the topic, they can address news values of *proximity* (e.g., when it concerns an issue of local importance), *impact/magnitude*, or *political elite*. The news value of *political elite* was particularly apparent when interviewing PAs of senior politicians and frontbenchers in the Scottish Parliament and the House of Commons. Interviewees explained that their access to journalists is easier due to their importance within the parliament, government or party (e.g., Interviewee A, Interviewee C or Interviewee K). Letters and FOIs are usually proactive measures but typically tactics, not strategies. They provide an opportunity which can be used for campaigning or political communication but are not tools for changing the communication environment. Interviewee Z9 explains the importance of FOIs in their campaigns:

"No, we're totally proactive. [...] We'll also run campaigns based on freedom of information requests that we'll put in to, you know, various bodies like our education stories and stuff. We put a lot of FOIs for all that. [...] On these [healthcare-related issues]: [...] [You] would put in your FOI requests to all the national health boards. To see if the situation in [the electoral region] then Scotland, both or each [...], is how it compares with elsewhere in the country. So whether this is an issue [...] just [...] affecting NHS [region] [...] or [an] issue

that's [nationally]. [...] If we find out that it is a national issue, then, you know, we go on a big national story about it or just a local one. If it's a local one, then we go just local on it." (Interviewee Z9, Interview on 30/08/2019)

The same interviewee also stated that "[you] can always get a story out of something" when referring to regularly occurring events, such as exam results. While some events are foreseeable and can be planned, others require a more reactive approach, such as media requests for statements by the MP or MSP on an emerging issue. This mix of proactive and reactive communication is also mirrored in the accounts of the usage of columns that some parliamentarians (or their PAs on their behalf) write in local/regional newspapers. Planning on the content is usually closer to the submission deadline, and topics often address the news value of *proximity* and *timeliness* by reflecting on upcoming or ongoing events in the region. Overall, interviewees highlighted that their work is very reactive. While most PAs could explain how they were proactive (often referring to long-term campaigns), their description of those activities indicated that they are somewhat limited and infrequent compared to other tasks featured in their daily, weekly and monthly workload. Interviewees also noted that it depends on several factors to what extent their work is reactive. In the case of Interviewee Z10, the extensive portfolio of the MSP has been identified as limiting proactive behaviour. Those are also used to communicate reactively and proactively. Interviewees of MPs and MSPs noted that the summer period would also be quieter and the workload limited so that there is space for proactive work.

Proximity, as already noted, is one of the critical news values PAs consider when working on communication output (especially since local media outlets are often targeted). Another critical aspect frequently addressed is avoiding aggressive negativity in the content of outgoing communication in these outlets.

"Broadly speaking, we took a decision very early on that the majority of our press output would be fairly apolitical [...]. We wouldn't launch a lot of attacks on other politicians [...]. We wouldn't have to make hugely political comments [...] in any of the press releases we put out." (Interviewee A, Interview on 26/08/2019)

Interviewee Q explained that this deliberate choice has also been made since the audience, which might not be tribal or partisan, would dislike a constant attack on political competitors. Another interviewee highlighted that national media or campaign work is to be distinguished from local activities (Interviewee F). This finding is not

surprising, considering the research, as mentioned earlier, on the role of local media and the expectations of locals towards these outlets. Since those are valued for community-building communication, negative communication might not be effective. Local journalists might not use the communication provided since they need to consider the expectations of their readers. Suppose negative communication on behalf of the parliamentarian is utilised, e.g., by printing the column or copying and pasting a press release. In that case, it might not have the intended effect since it might be seen as undermining the value of community-building. Consequently, the tendency to avoid placing negative political communication in local media is a strategic and proactive choice: it prevents an unfavourable situation from occurring and is identified as an approach among MSPs and MPs.

10.3 Competition and Conflict

10.3.1 Conflicts concerning the Parliamentary Office and its Communication Capacity

Some interviewed PAs were able to give accounts of how they deal with competition and conflict in the communication environment. One crucial dimension, which has been discussed in Chapter 8, is trust. The focus was primarily on the relationship of the parliamentarian to the PA and not vice versa. Interviewees' descriptions of the relationship with their MP or MSP highlight the importance of trust beyond whether the parliamentarians trust their PAs. If conflicts occur between the party and either the MPs or MSPs or their PAs, trust by the PA towards their employee becomes particularly important. Interviewees highlighted that their loyalty and commitment are primarily towards the parliamentarian. Interviewee K even explained that she would not want to work for some other parliamentarians from the same party. Consequently, identifying the PA with the policies and views of the parliamentarian goes beyond sharing the same party values. Other interviewees have confirmed this (e.g., Interviewees S and H). However, the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour and possible consequences vary. When asked how to deal with a conflict between the party and his parliamentarian, Interviewee L explained the difficulties which would arise from such a situation.

"I hope it never happens. [...] I would have to think about my job and what I want to do in the future and make my mind up. [...] There will be a personal ethical decision for me. Because if [...], for example, [the parliamentarian]

decided that he was [supporting policies against the key principles of the party] [...]. Then, if I were to continue working for him, I would communicate that line. That would be my job. He would be kicked out of the party, no doubt. Would I then continue working for [the parliamentarian] in that situation? Probably not." (Interviewee L, Interview on 04/09/2019)

One interviewed senior politician explained another case concerning one of the employees in their parliamentary office. The party complained about one of the staff members concerning articles published by the employee, which were contrary to the party's official position. The interviewee explained that the party wanted them to influence their employee to cease this activity. However, the interviewee said they rejected the request because their political ambitions and the party's potential to punish the interviewee at that point were limited.

"The leadership can apply political pressure to the [parliamentarian] [...] [and] [...] say your staff member is causing trouble. But that would be frowned upon; it'd be quite inappropriate for that to happen. [...] To give you an example, when I [was] [...] a backbencher [...], the leadership complained that a member of my staff was writing negative newspaper columns. [The person] was a part-time member of staff, he was a part-time journalist, and the leadership thought that I had a responsibility for what he wrote, and I steadfastly disagreed and said that they were entitled to their own opinions and their own views and [...] it had nothing to do [...] their employment with me. [...] The leadership [...] had no stick to beat me with; there's no punishment; what could they do?" (Interviewee C, Interview on 02/10/2019)

The provided example illustrates why avoiding conflicts is essential, not just to avoid negativity in political communication but also concerning conflicts in the parliamentary office and between the parliamentary office and the party. While conflicts between MPs or MSPs and their party are arguably more important (either caused by the parliamentarian's behaviour or by the behaviour of a staff member), the loss of a staff member is an additional problem that should be considered. Conflicts can undermine the parliamentary office's communication capacity in a difficult situation. Consequently, considering conflict avoidance as a factor in the recruitment process by selecting candidates close to the party and politically close to the parliamentarian's position is also an example of proactivity and strategic behaviour. It tries to prevent an unfavourable situation for the MP or MSP and avoid the loss of communication capacity, which arguably influences the office's ability to deal with the communication environment. However, it is unclear to what extent the increase of trust is an intended outcome of the recruitment process and in the management of staff members.

Interviewee TA, a former senior politician with a long tenure, indicated that fostering a trustful relationship is essential and does play a role in the parliamentarians' management of the relationship between them and their PAs. It was emphasised that trust needs to be mutual; the parliamentarian needs to trust the PA, and the PA needs to trust the parliamentarian. Building a trustful relationship would allow the PA to claim ownership of their tasks and responsibilities. TA highlighted that the lack of trust would be a significant factor in the high staff turnover of parliamentary offices in the House of Commons and the Scottish Parliament, which confirms the findings outlined in Chapter 8.

The need for mutual trust and understanding, as well as the need to build and maintain this kind of relationship, has also been emphasised by other interviewees (see, e.g., Interviewee S and LA). However, in these interviews, it has also been clarified that managing and organising the parliamentary office is the parliamentarian's domain. Consequently, some MPs and MSPs might not prioritise mutual trust, which would put their intent behind building and maintaining mutuality of trust in question. Therefore, the classification as a strategy depends on the context of parliamentary offices since a vital requirement to qualify as a strategy cannot be fulfilled without intent.

10.3.2 Competition and Conflict with other Parliamentarians and the Press Unit

Conflicts with other parliamentarians and the consequences for PAs' communication efforts have been discussed in some interviews. While a typical response addressed strategies to avoid conflicts in the first place, mainly by refraining from campaigning or targeted communication in other parliamentarians' regions or constituencies, some interviewees explained how conflicts are managed if they occur. In particular, two cases have been addressed: policy disagreements and competing interests in media exposure. Interviewees highlighted that reducing the conflict by finding a compromise or enforcing party discipline and collective responsibility, minimising the public exposure of these conflicts, and pre-warning ahead of disagreements would be essential (see, e.g., Interviewees C, A and I). The following account is from an interviewee working in a PPG press unit, explaining some conflict management options.

"You know, if you are not a [government minister or part of a shadow cabinet], you have got a bit more wriggle room because you [are] not bound by collective responsibility. [...] quite a lot of MSPs or their staff are good at flagging it up and saying *By the way, you know, here's what they going to say; this might*

become an issue so that we can prepare and be helpful, and if it's something that's going to be damaging to the reputation of the party, or maybe, or damaging to the MSP's reputation I maybe speak to them and counsel them and say *Is this such a good idea, do you want to have a think about this?* [...] I don't go all Malcolm Tucker on them [...], but [...] all parties have a whip system that you can [use] [...] if it gets to the point that you need one of the whips to remind them about party discipline." (Interviewee I, Interview on 06/09/2019)

While Interviewee I primarily referred to disagreements with national policies, another interviewed PA pointed to potential disagreements on local or regional developments. Interviewee A explained that in some cases, policies, plans or developments might be perceived differently in neighbouring constituencies or regions (e.g., transport links). Parliamentarians from the same party, targeting or representing those areas, would need to try to solve the situation or at least avoid further escalation.

"I think it varies on the issue [...], [...] [if] it is a very visible issue in the area, then you can't really be seen not to be engaging with it [...] I think it is one point you have to basically coordinate quite closely with the other MSPs who are affected by it [...] you have to [...] come to a compromise position or find a different angle on it. [...] You [can] actually [...] talk about what [...] the final outcome [of the policy could be], what comes next or what opportunities there are. Rather than kinda going at an issue directly. [...] [B]ut again it is just a matter of [...] the MSPs [...] speaking to each other and sometimes [that] [...] buys you time." (Interviewee A, Interview on 26/08/2019)

This explanation by Interviewee A illustrates that while trying to avoid conflict, parliamentarians are required to engage with the topic if it is of local relevance. Conflict avoidance by not engaging with it would be counter-productive since it would not meet their constituents' expectations, undermining the MP's and MSP's (re-)election prospects. The need to visibly engage with the issue, e.g., through press releases and interviews, addresses the news values of *proximity* and *magnitude* but conflicts with the news value of *negativity* that political actors aim to avoid. While the descriptions in both cited accounts are primarily tactical and reactive since they deal with an occurring situation, some notions of proactivity are identifiable. Providing a warning and giving your counterpart a heads-up increases their capacity to deal with the situation successfully and before they manifest publicly. This approach helps to foster close collaboration and coordination to work on an amicable approach to the contentious matter.

Interviewee K, however, explained another approach. Instead of negotiating a compromise or providing a warning, it is suggested that a workaround be found. In their

account, they described a situation in which their MSP wanted to put out a press release to the national media on a matter which was not in the portfolio of the parliamentarian. Since press units are usually responsible for political communication to national media, those press releases would have needed to go through their press office. If these press releases had been handed over to those press units, it would have been unlikely that they would have remained unaltered since they covered the portfolio of another politician. Consequently, the parliamentary office suspected that the name of the relevant frontbencher would have been prominently placed in the release at the expense of the initiating parliamentarian.

"Don't get me wrong, and that's not always the case because a lot of the stuff that we have focused on, [the MSP]'s had a genuine interest and investment in the issue [...] with the stuff that is [on the particular policy issue] when we literally slogged for six months, to then have nothing come of it for your own kind of personal use is slightly frustrating. So we would just use it ourselves."
(Interviewee K, Interview on 27/08/2019)

This account illustrates how competing interests guide employed communication tactics. While the interviewee highlighted that the press office would do "brilliant work" and the PA's office would not regularly try to circumvent them, this case demonstrates the value of media exposure, i.e. of communication activities that are perceived as successful. It also addresses whether a party or personal votes are pursued: the drive for personal ownership over the content of the outgoing communication was imperative. At least in this case, it can be concluded that the pursuit of personal votes had a significant impact. The approach can be classified as a tactic rather than a strategy since it dealt proactively with an anticipated situation and did not attempt to change it.

While interviewees of all parties reported conflicts, there seems to be a gradual difference between smaller PPGs and medium or large-sized PPGs. In smaller parties, there have been accounts referring to disagreements on national policies. In medium and large parties, those conflicts within the PPG can be on the local, regional and national levels. The distinction between *groups* and *teams* is also, in this case, quite helpful. While disagreements can be of substance in all parties in both parliaments, there is a pronounced, competitive element among medium and large parties regarding access to media outlets. One example was illustrated by Interviewee K, which demonstrates potential (competitive) conflicts between the parliamentary offices and press units; another case was provided by Interviewee A on neighbouring parliamentarians.

However, the latter example shows the limitations of utilising the *concepts of groups and teams*. There are incentives to engage in a competitive relationship, for example, concerning access to media outlets and positioning oneself favourably, but there is also a strong incentive for collaboration and joint effort to avoid negative news coverage.

10.4 Political Communication on Social Media: Perks, Perils and Partial Neglect

All interviewees confirmed that social media would be part of their MPs or MSPs office's communication activities. However, the workload and resources dedicated to it and which platforms are used vary. Interviewees typically identified Twitter and Facebook as the most relevant platforms. While there has been the notion of social media as an engaging medium in the interviews, some PAs explained that they would utilise social media platforms primarily for one-way communication, and interactions with other users would be limited.

"It is certainly more of a one-way process in that respect. It is definitely asking questions such as *We're concerned about fly-tipping. Have you experienced it in your area? Let us know*. Inviting that, but most of the time, it is just *Here we are. This is what we are doing. This is what we are aiming for*. It is a one-way process. We're not necessarily looking for that feedback in that aspect, and we are certainly not looking for negativity." (Interviewee Z11, Interview on 14/08/2019)

In addition, when interviewees were asked how they use social media for their communication, their explanations pointed towards an understanding of engagement as how the audience engages with their content. Only the minority of interviewees provided further explanations that implied the use of social media interactively from the side of their office (for example, see, e.g., Interviewees X and M). One of the challenges hampering an interactive approach, which interviewees have identified, is the potential for abuse on social media. One interviewee provides an example about an acquainted parliamentarian: The MP in question would generally not revisit posts on his social media accounts "because if he did, he will go crazy because he will check all the horrible, horrible abuse" (see Interviewee Q, Interview on 21/08/2019). From the interviews, it has not been clear whether using social media platforms solely as a one-to-many communication tool is typical of parliamentary offices for MPs and MSPs. The majority of interviewees agreed that social media is, in principle, an essential tool for engaging with the public. In particular, it has the potential to reach specific demographics, such as "younger people and middle-aged people" (Interviewee N, Interview on 30/09/2019).

However, interviewees usually disagreed – either explicitly or implicitly – that content and media events would have been specifically designed for their social media activities. Very often, the material used for traditional political communication (i.e. press releases) would have been re-used and adjusted to the needs and requirements of the platforms. However, it has been explained that these adjustments also require significant effort. Interviewee Z14 illustrated how the approaches differ among the parliamentary offices; his previous employer, for example, did not ask for any changes or adjustments. In his current role as PA, he would adjust his presentation, form, and writing style on social media, which sometimes requires substantial changes to pre-existing drafts.

"[I]n terms of social media, you find it a bit more informal as well, you know, [...] personality and all the rest of it. [...] DA will add his own wee touch to it, so I'll do the basic kind of structure of it, the basic kind of story, [...] DA will add wee bits and bobs to it or a bit more of a flourish, I suppose. Because, you know, social media, [...] you want to get across to people that, you know, this is coming from your elected representative. [...] In my previous job, my previous MP, I just did all the social media; there was no tweaking or anything like that with the Facebook and Twitter [and] all the rest of it. (Interviewee Z14, Interview on 14/09/2019)

The importance of providing *audio-visuals* has also been highlighted. They are considered vital since they make the content more appealing to the audience. For example, parliamentarians' speeches in the chamber would be utilised for their social media presence by clipping and editing them to an appropriate length to make them more engaging. With this in mind, Interviewee H explained that they would aim to include a punchline in their speeches, which can be picked up by either media representatives or used on social media.

"If you are writing a speech on something that has a lot of interest, you will try and include [...] maybe [a] 15 to 20 second period, which I would call a punch. [...] [Y]ou are attacking an opponent who was wrong about something. You are attacking a policy, or you are trying to construct that policy or position which can be turned into a video and which will grab people." (Interviewee H, 23/08/2019)

This example is particularly interesting since it also provides insight into the relevance of *teamwork* within the office. The speechwriter does not necessarily do the clipping and editing, and this PA is also not exclusively responsible for writing press releases either. However, the speeches are tailored to be utilised beyond the speech for the particular occasion. They are designed to be used as a source for press releases and are

also usable in a shortened form as a clip on social media (see Interviewees F and H). Creating communication output, in this case, can be described as a joint effort, given the involvement of at least two people and the high degree of necessary interaction and dependency between them. It is important to note that on the approach to social media, there has been generally very little difference between the accounts of PAs who worked for MPs and PAs who worked for MPs (list and constituency mandate).

Interviewees noted that social media provides the unique opportunity to show the human or personal side of the politician, adding to the already noted "informality" (see Interviewee Z14) of the medium, e.g. by "saying [on Twitter or Facebook], *Oh, this week I went to [...] a dog sanctuary*" (Interviewee Z4, Interview on 19/08/2019). The opportunity to tag (local) organisations, campaign groups or businesses that have been visited was also mentioned as an interesting tool since it might attract further engagement from the audience (e.g., Interviewees A, B, D and E). While the topics covered on social media are varied, content with local relevance has been identified as essential throughout all interviews, reinforcing the finding that *proximity* and *timeliness* are among the most relevant news values in the communication of parliamentary offices. Nevertheless, news values like *impact/magnitude*, *prominence*, and *power elite* are usually also covered by communicating issues of national importance, party policies, and controversy (e.g., Interviewees A, K, G, and P), as noted in the example by Interviewee Z4, *human interest* are also featured – particularly on social media. On addressing party policies on social media, an interviewee explained that these occasions usually require greater involvement of the parliamentarian:

"With Twitter, [KA] will tweet herself...when she tweets, it's more of a political statement. She's wanting to say it because politicians use Twitter as their official like their official platform now. So [KA] will do that when there's an issue that she wants her views to be known about." (Interviewee K, Interview on 27/08/2019)

Analytical tools have been identified as helpful in increasing the reach of the messaging since they enable the PAs to evaluate which content has received more engagement from residents.

"[F]or Facebook I use just the normal insights that Facebook provides. I'm very good at, you know, giving you a breakdown of how well each post did [...] same with Twitter as well, their analytics are pretty good, and doing the same thing in terms of engagement." (Interviewee Z12, Interview on 27/08/2019)

However, it is noteworthy that Interviewee Z13 described some of these tools as not user-friendly and that they would require some degree of expertise to utilise them. While this critique has not been mirrored in other interviews, it illustrates that technical skills and understanding of these tools are necessary to utilise them as supporting instruments for communication on social media and that the knowledge of how to use them cannot be taken for granted. Consequently, even though PAs of MPs and MSPs explained that they monitor reactions and engagements on social media, the understanding and application of specific tools seemed, at times, very limited:

"I think that people do get far too tied up in the detail of them, and I think that [...] just because one post with a particular style or a particular type of graphic and a particular picture [...] worked Wednesday morning, it's not [necessarily] going to work again the next Wednesday morning [...] there's no point giving it a sec, *oh, you know, 16 people shared it, not nine*, well, we're still getting shares, and it's still getting a good reach [...] that's the way of looking at it I think."
(Interviewee Z14, Interview on 14/09/2019)

The notion of the need for expertise to use existing tools to analyse social media engagement and the limited use of these tools reinforces the finding outlined in Chapter 8. PAs professionalise throughout their tenure, most eventually leaving their position when they have acquired skills and expertise. Considering this, it is unsurprising that those analytical tools for communication and engagement on social media are underutilised. Using those instruments requires expertise, skills and experience, which might not be at the disposal of the PAs responsible for communications. Additionally, using social media as a communication tool might not be a priority for some parliamentarians either. Interviewees differed in their descriptions of parliamentarians' priorities on social media usage, and in some cases, the views on the importance of social media compared to traditional media diverged between PAs and their MPs or MSPs. Interviewee P, for example, highlighted that they would like to focus on political communication on social media platforms, e.g., by having podcasts with their parliamentarian.

"I think QA and I disagree on how best to do that. QA, you know, does have a preference for traditional media, so papers and radio. I would rather utilise social media." (Interviewee P, Interview on 16/09/2019)

The interviewee also noted that most parliamentarians, including their employer, seem to prioritise communication output targeting traditional media outlets.

However, while it varies from office to office how much effort is put into social media activities, most parliamentary offices of MPs and MSPs have a presence on Facebook and Twitter, some even on Instagram. In most cases, staff members have full access to these accounts, and PAs explained that they would regularly and frequently utilise them for their communication activities. The majority of interviewees also confirmed that PAs would manage social media accounts and create most of the published content.

Some interviewees outlined that their offices would also utilise targeting tools provided by social media platforms to increase their reach among specific audiences (e.g., residents in defined postcode regions, as described by Interviewee U). Beyond this, and for most interviewed PAs of MPs and MSPs, there was an explicit recognition that they would have a specific audience on social media (e.g., party members or local voters), which is very different to their audience in the local media. They noted that these audiences need to be addressed with content and language tailored to their expectations and interests (see, e.g., Interviewees E, I and Z14). At the same time, some interviewees explained that they would upload whole press releases on social media accounts and websites (see, e.g., Interviewees A and F). One interviewee explicitly criticised this practice, noting that local press is unlikely to use those releases "if you are going to have blabbed it all over your Facebook" (Interviewee Z13, Interview on 10/09/2019). There are also different accounts of the extent to which PAs utilise targeting tools provided by social media platforms for their communication efforts, questioning how typical those approaches are. For example, interviewee J highlighted that targeting tools would not be suitable due to the parliamentary budget's legal limitations. Other interviewees (see, e.g., Interviewees Z15 and K), however, mentioned that they used them within the existing legal framework:

"No, we have done some targeted Facebook ads, but what we have done is been through advertising constituency searches, so it has just been geographical. Just as long as they are over eighteen and can vote, the reason for that is Facebook advertising promoted quotes costs money and can use the parliamentary budget to promote constituency surgeries." (Interviewee Z13, Interview on 10/09/2019)

Another recurring theme in the interviews was the involvement of parliamentarians in creating content for communication on social media. This is closely related to the aforementioned impact of the communication priorities of MPs and MSPs on the allotted resources spent on social media activities, which can be subject to internal discussions in parliamentary offices. To illustrate this, in several instances, it has been

explained that some MPs and MSPs prefer to run the Twitter account almost exclusively by themselves (see, e.g., Interviewee CA, X and A). Interviewee X outlined that this would not necessarily be due to the lack of trust but to the particular character of the platform since it requires a much higher degree of authenticity.

Adding to this, some interviewees also criticised the appropriateness of how some parliamentarians use social media. Critique has been directed towards the efficiency of the parliamentarians' activities and the potential for reputational damage by posting controversial content. One interviewee, for example, described difficulties with managing the social media account of the parliamentarian due to him "having loads and loads of posts a day [that are] not doing anything for your likes or your views, so it's sometimes difficult to [...] keeping it to maybe three or four posts a day" (Interviewee F, Interview on 23/08/2019). Interviewee I addressed problems in the past with the appropriateness of the content posted by parliamentarians on social media:

"The current crop have all had [...] social media accounts for several years now and [...] are probably more experienced and realise what gets them into trouble of what, you know, some are good in using social media. Some are bad, some will always be a nightmare, and I think people should be banned from social media [...] [*laughing*] but [...] yes, [...] it's free speech, but [...] occasionally there's a reminder needed that this is free speech to [...] a following of tens of thousands of people so just [...] don't put anything in a tweet that you wouldn't want to put in the press release that [...] you wouldn't want people to know about you." (Interviewee I, Interview on 06/09/2019)

The outlined critique of some of the content communicated by MPs and MSPs (or their offices on their behalf) illustrates the tense relationship between achieving reach and the risk for one's image or the party's reputation. Addressing issues of national importance and controversy creates newsworthiness and more interest and attention from key stakeholders on social media. Depending on the issue, the politician might be expected to comment and be seen as involved, particularly if the politician in question is connected with this issue. In those cases, it becomes challenging to avoid commenting on that matter, as explained in the previous section. However, by addressing those issues publicly, unfiltered and possibly under time pressure on social media, parliamentarians are exposed to a higher risk of becoming subject to controversy and negative news coverage.

Overall, addressing news values is decisive when selecting content for communication on social media. The findings mirror the approach reported by PAs on topic selection

for communication through traditional media. However, communication on social media has been characterised in most interviews as complementary, with only little effort and resources assigned to it. While the potential for interactions with the audience and the potential to reach specific demographics has been noted, interviewees described a passive, if not one-directional, communication approach. Some interviewees described a strategic use of social media, e.g., by targeting specific demographics and using analytical tools to increase the reach. The intent in those cases goes beyond dealing with a particular situation (e.g., reacting to a political incident); it aims to create a more favourable position for future communication by optimising communication approaches and increasing the parliamentarian's visibility. Most offices also employ communication tactics on social media, especially considering the content adjustments according to the type of platform to improve its appeal. The *shareability* of released content, measured by the audience's engagement, has been an important theme throughout the interviews. However, the content is usually not exclusively created for social media but a by-product of existing communication efforts (such as press releases). With this, communication on social media by parliamentary offices can be characterised as particularly reactive: It is reactive towards emerging debates and controversies, which MPs and MSPs are somewhat expected to comment on, and it usually covers already produced content.

While the content is often not exclusive, interviewees explained that significant effort is often put into social media by MPs' and MSPs' parliamentary offices. Although PAs rarely tailor speeches, press releases, or campaigns with the primary goal of posting them on social media, the communication output has been described as integrated into a multi-platform communication approach. Speeches are written keeping in mind that they will be shared on social media, and communication via social media is accounted for in the communication efforts of the parliamentary offices. At times, they require substantial collaboration, confirming the importance of interaction among PAs for creating communication output.

The notion of authenticity and being able to present the parliamentarian as a person has been another important finding. This mirrors broader trends of personalisation of politics and addresses existing incentives of the Scottish electoral system. However, in this context, party communication has also proven relevant. For one, party accounts sharing the posts of individual MPs and MSPs increase the reach of the

parliamentarian's messages. Second, reputational damage by posting controversial content can lead to interference by the party (see, e.g., Interviewee I), which is why the parliamentarians themselves usually do those types of political messaging themselves (or explicitly approve it).

10.5 Conclusion

Overall, interviews have shown that communication officers of MPs and MSPs alike consider the expectations and needs of journalists, mainly from local media outlets, when creating communication output. This is particularly apparent when considering how news values are addressed in press releases, media events or social media. While there are proactive elements in communication-related work, interviewees described their work often as reactive. The reactivity is also mirrored in the frequently negative response on whether they would have an overarching communication strategy. Even though there are strategic elements in their communication activities, as the findings in this chapter have demonstrated, the reactive environment and resource constraints to manage emerging situations in favour of the parliamentarian shape PAs' communication efforts and limit the capacity for strategic communication.

While the extent to which PAs can address news values varies, interviewees recognised that the expectations of local media need to be considered and that their requirements of newsworthiness are to be met. From this, it can be concluded that the mediatisation of politics shapes the political communication of parliamentarians. The tendency to put the parliamentarian in the centre of the communication output has also been identified, particularly for MPs and MSPs from bigger PPGs irrespective of their type of mandate, since list MSPs from medium-sized and large parties often aim to become constituency parliamentarians. Closely linked with this is the different approach to collaboration of large- and medium-sized parliamentary offices compared to smaller PPGs. The former tend to foster more competitive relationships between their parliamentary offices and incentivise group-based communication efforts and personal-vote-seeking messaging. Parliamentary offices of small PPGs tend to be more open to collaboration and joint communication efforts with greater emphasis on party-vote-seeking communication. Interviewees have indicated that this is very similar to the House of Commons; the small sub-sample on which those findings for MPs of small-sized PPGs rest urges caution.

MSPs of Scottish Liberal Democrats faced a situation where incentives for pursuing personal-vote as well as party-vote were present. Their MSPs were often constituency-based, which usually incentivises personal-vote-seeking activities. However, given the size of their PPG, they also have strong incentives to collaborate, favouring party-vote-seeking communication. Even though there is a risk of diluting messages aimed at harnessing personal votes, joint efforts were nevertheless undertaken. From the descriptions of the interviewed PAs from the Scottish Liberal Democrats, *team*-based communication efforts were more relevant for them than for parliamentary offices from mid-sized and larger PPGs. With this in mind, it can be concluded that the electoral system in Scotland has a significant impact on the political communication of MSPs. It is more representative and, with this, increases the size of the PPGs of small parties and incentivises joint communication efforts among them. Still, there is also a notable influence of the UK's FPTP system; the importance assigned to constituency mandates has been a recurring theme and shapes the political activities of parliamentarians. However, it also needs to be highlighted that the importance of constituency mandates can be partially explained by the overrepresentation of this type of mandate in the Scottish Parliament.

Avoiding negative messaging in local media has been another important theme, particularly concerning the utilisation of social media for the communication of parliamentary offices. The avoidance of being perceived as too party-political primarily refers to communication involving local media outlets, which the specific expectations of residents towards the local press can explain. The reasoning of PAs is to mirror those expectations and adapt towards the news values and media logic of local media, with a strong focus on *proximity* and community-building. This form of mediatisation and professionalisation of communication is also visible in handling communication on social media. PAs highlighted the importance of being local and the opportunity to present the MP or MSP more informally as a person rather than a politician, focusing on the news value of *human interest*. However, platforms like Facebook and Twitter also provide incentives for engagements in "political" and controversial debates, which can increase the reach of political messaging but also carry risks for MPs and MSPs and their parties. The avoidance of open conflicts and becoming subject to negative media coverage have been addressed by interviewees. They explained how arrangements are made to prevent "stepping on each other's toes" and that coordination and pre-warnings

in political disagreements are encouraged. The approach towards conflict avoidance and damage minimisation is visible on a strategic and tactical level, irrespective of the type of mandate the parliamentarian holds.

Communication on social media also illustrates the increasing relevance of *shareability* as a pursued news value. While there has been an emphasis on providing engaging content, PAs described their communication efforts on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter as complimentary and one-way. With this, it is unsurprising that existing tools, such as targeting and analytical instruments, are often underutilised. They require expertise, which varies across offices, and the will to provide substantial financial resources, which might not be available or a priority for the MP or MSP. PAs' varying degrees of expertise in communication efforts have also been visible in engagements with media, for example, in the degree of adjustments undertaken to target specific media outlets, the use of exclusives or the utilisation of media events.

To conclude, the apparent tendency to adapt to media logic in communication practices on behalf of MPs and MSPs on social media, local media, or national media confirms broader trends in the mediatisation of political communication. However, the capacity of each parliamentary office to incorporate media logic in their communication to maximise reach and improve the position of their MP or MSP in candidate selection processes and upcoming elections varies. Similarly to previous chapters, the parliamentarians' priorities, financial constraints, and the reactive communication environment significantly impact the communication output creation process. But beyond this, the parliamentarian's characteristics (e.g., seniority and tenure) and the type of mandate (i.e., list vs constituency mandate) influence the accessibility to media outlets and the newsworthiness of outgoing communication, independently from the aforementioned structural and personal constraints. The abilities of the PAs to address the different media stakeholders and audiences also varied greatly and significantly impacted the communication approach and content creation process. Overall, the findings of previous chapters have been confirmed: Interviewed PAs undergo the process of professionalisation and undertake their communication efforts at different stages of the process, leading to different degrees of professional handling of communication efforts. Those variations can become manifest in targeting practices, the utilisation of analytical tools for their communication and engagement on social media, engagement with local media, i.e. adjusting content towards expectations of key

stakeholders, e.g., in language and style, and their ability to develop long-term communication strategies.

11 Conclusions

This study aims to shed light on the "unsung heroes" of parliament, the parliamentary assistants, whose role is largely neglected by the political communication scholarship and political science community. This final chapter presents the thesis's conclusions and contextualises the findings in the ongoing academic debates. It closes by evaluating this study's limitations and discussing possible avenues for future research.

This thesis set out to answer the following research questions:

1. What importance do parliamentary offices assign to media management and political communication outside the *purdah* period?
2. How is the relationship between parliamentarian and media managed and political communication planned, designed, and executed in a parliamentary office?

The findings show that political communication is crucial for parliamentary offices, particularly in terms of relationships with and communication through local media. However, political communication is usually not assigned with an overarching relevance; areas such as casework are as important. The critical determinants for political communication are not professional qualities but trust and loyalty. MPs' and MSPs' interests and priorities shape the content and form of the communication output directly and indirectly, which includes the organisation of the political communication process in the parliamentary office. Work within their parliamentary office is usually approached as a *group* effort, not a *team* or *solo effort*, which also influences the content and presentation of the communication. The exercise of control over the communication process by MPs and MSPs and the arrangements for creating the political communication output within the office significantly impact the professionalisation of PAs and their capacity to integrate media logic into the communication process.

The thesis also finds that the electoral system and party size are other critical factors shaping political communication on behalf of MPs and MSPs. Larger parties have been found to incentivise a clear division of labour among parliamentary offices, increasing their ability to focus on particular areas and preventing conflicts over campaigning efforts to target constituencies. Smaller parties in both parliaments tend to be more collaborative, irrespective of the type of mandate. In both cases, the findings indicate that the underlying driver for the behaviour is to optimise their capacity to successfully

communicate with voters and meet the expectations of media stakeholders, demonstrating that considering media logic is an essential driver in those arrangements. While political communication is largely reactive, those arrangements demonstrate that there are proactive and strategic elements in the planning and organisation of communication by parliamentary offices.

This thesis contributes significantly to the literature on the professionalisation of political communication and the mediatisation of politics. It provides insight into an important but under-explored area of political communication by focusing on the political communication of parliamentarians. It demonstrates that these developments are manifest but limited in the political communication of MPs and MSPs. The following section discusses the results of the three findings chapters (Chapters 8 to 10) in the context of relevant scholarly debates.

11.1 Results and Contributions to Scholarly Debates

The first findings chapter (Chapter 8) is focused on the role of PAs designated to communication tasks and their relationship to the parliamentarian. The chapter demonstrates that political communication is one of the critical activities for the parliamentary office, although its relevance does not exceed other areas (e.g., casework). Communication officers are rarely just focused on communication-related tasks; they are usually involved in various activities in the parliamentary office. Consequently, very few PAs with professional backgrounds in communication or PR are hired to fulfil the role of the political communicator on behalf of the parliamentarian. Parliamentary assistants are employed as multi-functional "jack of all trades". Very few had relevant experiences and skills for performing communication tasks or managing relationships of the parliamentary office with media stakeholders.

Trust has been identified in the first findings chapter as one of the most relevant factors influencing PAs' relationship with the parliamentarian and their role as communication officers. Unsurprisingly, trust is one of the critical determinants shaping the hiring process, the parliamentarian's approach towards controlling the communication process. Both processes have been conceptualised in models illustrating the limited relevance of the value of the professional qualities of the communication officer. This finding provides a significant counterpoint to the debate on the professionalisation of political communication. While the literature on the professionalisation of political

communication indicates an increasing appreciation of professional knowledge and experience, this has not been mirrored in interviewees' accounts. Trust is the entry requirement to become a communication officer; the skills and experiences to effectively fulfil this role are not a prerequisite and are acquired "on the job". The chapter, therefore, proposes conceptualising this PAs' professionalisation process throughout their tenure with the "Lifecycle of a Communication Officer" (see Figure 9). This lifecycle also points towards a paradox of the professionalisation process; the more PAs professionalise and acquire relevant skills, the higher the chance they leave their role as communication officers. By leaving their role, the process restarts. Consequently, there is a loss of professional qualities in political communication, which will need to be recovered over time.

With the restart of the professionalisation process, there is also a renewed need to build up levels of trust in the new incumbent of the role of the communication officer. The levels of trust, as mentioned above, significantly impact how parliamentarians exercise control over the communication process, i.e. through the sign-off procedure. Chapter 8, therefore, conceptualises the different approaches and their implications for the PA's workload and the parliamentarian's influence on the communication process. The link between trust and workload has been identified as significant since the workload is one of the key drivers behind the relatively high staff turnover. High turnover is one of the key impediments to the professionalisation process, as it increases the chance of PAs leaving, particularly as soon as they have acquired relevant skills, allowing them to find more attractive employment.

Chapter 8 also shows that while there is a process of professionalisation of political communication, several impediments limit this process. In particular, the control exercised over the sign-off process is one of the key impediments. Parliamentarians' decisions on whether to release outgoing communication are usually judged based on whether the content authentically reflects the voice and position of the parliamentarian. In addition, their understanding of what constitutes good communication informs the decision. Since MPs and MSPs usually do not have a background in professional communication, this is arguably another barrier since professionally drafted communication might not comply with the parliamentarian's expectations.

Furthermore, Chapter 8 demonstrates the significance of the relationship between parliamentarians and communication officers. Trust, not professionalism, is key to

understanding this relationship and its impact on the communication process. Therefore, the integration of media logic and the professionalisation of political communication is significantly limited. Professionalism is acquired over time but is not a prerequisite of the role, and understanding media logic is part of the learning process but not a given. Moreover, communication is just one area among others; this arguably limits to what extent the activities of parliamentary offices can be classified as mediated.

Chapter 9 shifts the focus away from the relationship between PAs and parliamentarians towards the inner workings of the parliamentary offices and the arrangements among staff members which organise the communication process. The organisation of communication-related tasks is typically arranged around the interests and priorities of the parliamentarian. While most parliamentary offices implement a division of labour constituting a *group effort*, *team* and *solo efforts* in communication- and media-related responsibilities have also been identified. The set-up of arrangements significantly impacts how communication processes are undertaken, shaping the communication output's content and presentation. It is a critical determinant in the professionalisation process of the individual PAs and the political communication of the parliamentary office. The organisation of the communication process regulates the extent and the type of communication-related tasks PAs are exposed to. Given that PAs learn and professionalise "on the job", having fewer opportunities to work on relevant tasks limits the learning process. Therefore, *group* and *team efforts* impede professionalising political communication on behalf of parliamentarians. However, considering the relatively high staff turnover, allocating the tasks to several people rather than concentrating them on one or a few PAs reduces the risk of a sudden loss of acquired levels of professionalism when the PA leaves the role of communication officer.

Similar to the findings in Chapter 8, Chapter 9 demonstrates that the parliamentarians' interpersonal relations with staff members are another crucial factor. Those relations are essential for the stability of existing arrangements and staff turnover. Overly tense relations or conflicts can lead to instability of the office arrangements and higher staff turnover, which hampers the professionalisation process. It reinforces the finding that trust matters; it shapes the political communication process and must be mutual. This result illustrates the challenges of professionalisation from within the office: Trust is a critical element in the working arrangements among PAs. The lack of mutual trust and poor interpersonal relations among PAs and between PAs and parliamentarians

destabilise the organisation of communication-related tasks and undermine the "learning on the job"-process necessary to professionalise. The findings in Chapter 9 contribute to the debate on the professionalisation of political communication by showing that the working arrangements in parliamentary offices significantly shape the professionalisation process. The decentralisation of tasks poses a challenge, and with it, it further undermines the incorporation of media logic.

Finally, Chapter 10 explores the practices of PAs in content creation and media management and evaluates the strategic decision-making of parliamentary offices in their political communication. Political communication has been identified as very reactive due to the limited capacity for proactive communication. The limitations result from competing priorities of tasks unrelated to communication, workload and the limited experience of communication officers. Consequently, it reinforces the findings of Chapter 8, highlighting that political communication is not an overarching priority in the activities of parliamentary offices but a critical area among other critical areas. This finding demonstrates the limitations of the mediatisation process in communication practices.

The findings show that parliamentary offices are usually more reactive than proactive; the workload and the limitations of resources are a barrier to proactive behaviour. However, there are also strategic elements in their political communication activities. List parliamentarians of large-sized PPGs usually divide the electoral regions among each other to shadow constituencies. This shadowing behaviour enables targeted political communication through local media and social media. Beyond providing the opportunity to focus on a particular region, this *group* approach also helps to prevent conflicts among MSPs, which could lead to negative news coverage. In contrast, parliamentarians of small-sized PPGs tend to be more collaborative. The reason for their willingness to approach communication as a joint effort is their struggle to receive media attention; their small size and limited financial resources are an impediment. Working together is a measure to maximise the utilisation of opportunities for media exposure. Following the accounts and reasoning of interviewees, both approaches can be understood as driven by media logic since they aim to support parliamentary offices in creating newsworthy content, increasing their reach and chance for favourable news coverage.

The integration of media logic is also visible in PAs' creation of communication output—interviewees' approaches to political communication are best understood through the analytical lens of news values. They explained that selecting and presenting topics for their political communication is usually driven by anticipating the expectations and needs of local media stakeholders. It was also apparent that the experience of parliamentary assistants in their role significantly influenced their practices. The more advanced they were in the conceptualised "Lifecycle of a Communication Officer", the more they emphasised and considered the expectations and needs of local media stakeholders. This finding is significant because it illustrates the impact of professionalisation on the integration of media logic in the practices of PAs. Moreover, it demonstrates the overarching importance of local media in the political communication approach of parliamentary offices. MPs, constituency MSPs and list MSPs from larger PPGs focus on local media because they aim for re-election or shadow constituencies to position themselves favourably in future elections. Their communication typically fosters personal votes by directly promoting the work and the parliamentarian in the outgoing communication. This is also visible in the behaviour of MSPs from smaller PPGs and their willingness to collaborate, indicating that their parliamentarians are more inclined to aim for political communication that fosters party votes. The decision to aim for personal or party votes also points towards integrating media logic and strategic elements in their political decision-making: Smaller parties depend more on favourable results in list votes than constituency votes. Consequently, there is a greater focus on the former. To maximise party votes, they collaborate. This approach manifests in their approach to national media. The members of small-sized PPGs aim to address topics and expectations relevant to those national media outlets instead of targeting local media only. The different political communication approaches of members of small-sized PPGs compared to large-sized PPGs also demonstrate the impact of the electoral system on political communication practices. The weight of constituency seats in Scottish electoral systems can explain the focus on local media and the shadowing behaviour by parliamentary offices of members of large-sized PPGs. The reliance on favourable list votes by small parties and their consequent inclination to be more willing to address national media outlets are due to their relative advantage in the competition over list mandates compared to constituency mandates.

Lastly, Chapter 10 finds that political communication on social media is becoming increasingly important for communication on behalf of MSPs and MPs. While interviewees explained practices illustrating the integration of new values relevant to social media platforms, they also confirmed that their social media activity is usually confined to broadcasting messages rather than interacting with their followers. Additionally, parliamentarians have been described as more involved in those communication efforts, putting in question to what extent communication of social media professionalises. Another aspect which needs to be considered when evaluating the capacity of parliamentary offices to professionalise their communication on social media is the lack of (personnel and financial) resources for targeted messaging and analytics. However, interviewees described an increased awareness towards the potential pitfalls of using social media (e.g., avoidance of negativity and attacks). This awareness can be understood as increased professionalisation by minimising the risks of negative news coverage through greater consideration of the operating logic of social media.

The contribution this study provides to existing debates on political communication is fourfold. First, it explores an area which has been under-researched since PAs as political communicators have barely been featured in academic debates (bar a few notable examples, such as Sabag Ben-Porat and Lehman-Wilzig, 2021, Sabag Ben-Porat et al., 2020, Lev-On et al., 2017). This study provides one of the first in-depth investigations into their practices, their role and development based on a case allowing for plausible conjectures for communication officers in other parliamentary contexts, e.g., towards control mechanisms of their work, need for trust and the integration of media logic in their practices. Second, as demonstrated in the Methodology Chapter (Chapter 7), the results of this study are transferable and suitable as a starting point for further investigations, particularly from a comparative perspective. Third, debates on mediatization emphasised an increased tendency to integrate media logic into political actors' decision-making. This study demonstrates that while there is a tendency to incorporate media logic when organising and creating political communication, the evidence shows the integration of media logic is very limited. This is due to the limited professionalisation of communication officers, the approaches of parliamentarians to control the political communication process, and external factors (e.g., generally high workload and limited financial resources). Fourth, the results point out the limitations

of professionalisation in the context of parliamentary offices' political communication and explore the underlying reasons. One of the key findings is the importance of trust and how it shapes the organisation, content, and presentation of political communication. The professional qualities of political communication are secondary. However, despite the prioritisation of trust over experience and skill, tendencies towards more professional conduct have been identified even though they do not necessarily mirror the extent of professionalisation of political communication documented in the literature. The following quote encapsulates this sentiment towards professional communication:

"[I]t is quite unprofessional, and a lot of it is also rooted in safety and security of the politics of who you're employing rather than it being a meritocracy. [...] The press release only has to be good enough, but it's your man hours and energy that ultimately return election results." (Interviewee C, Interview on 02/10/2019)

The thesis is primarily situated within the realm of political communication; however, it also provides a number of valuable contributions to the sub-field of parliamentary studies. As it has been noted in previous chapters, research on parliamentary assistants is scarce despite being recognised by political practitioners (Dale, 2015, Flynn, 2012) and by scholars in the few available studies on their role in legislatures outside the USA (Brandsma and Otjes, 2024, McKee, 2023, Otjes, 2023, Lettrari, 2020, Dickin, 2016), most of them very recently published, as crucial for the functioning of the parliamentary machinery. While this study primarily focuses on them as political communicators, their accounts of their working practices, intra-office dynamics, and relationships with their parliamentarians provide a much more comprehensive insight into their role as PAs beyond their activities as communication officers. This is partly due to the flexible nature of their job; being a "jack of all trades" also meant their explanation of communication activities and approaches were embedded in broader accounts of activities and dynamics within the office. Consequently, they provided examples and illustrations that usually address also non-communication-related activities and their importance for the functioning of the parliamentary office, including the dynamics among staff members of MPs and MSPs. Beyond providing an insight into Scottish parliamentary offices and the role of PAs, it also constitutes a reference point for comparative studies on parliamentary staff. Considering the recently growing interest in PAs (i.e., Brandsma and Otjes, 2024, McKee, 2023, Otjes, 2023, Sabag Ben-Porat

and Lehman-Wilzig, 2021, Lettrari, 2020, Sabag Ben-Porat et al., 2020), this study provides a wealth of in-depth data which can be utilised for comparisons with other parliaments from different angles (e.g., focusing on the role of trust, intra-office dynamics etc.).

Arguably, this study also contributes to debates around "new politics" and whether the Scottish Parliament is of substantial difference to the House of Commons (see, e.g., Cairney, 2020, Denny, 2020, Parker and Richter, 2018, Mitchell, 2010, Shephard et al., 2001). Considering the results of this thesis, the roles and practices of PAs in the Scottish Parliament are very similar, at large, to the House of Commons. The accounts from interviewees working for one of those places were reasonably similar, and PAs who worked for parliamentary offices in both parliaments confirmed that there is – at large – very little difference. From the perspective of parliamentary actors, the Scottish Parliament is very much like Westminster, which aligns with research results on other aspects of Scottish politics that note significant similarities to UK politics (see, e.g., Cairney, 2020, Parker et al., 2020, Mitchell and Henderson, 2020b, Mitchell, 2010). However, a few differences have been noted, i.e. concerning the pursuit of party votes by list MSPs. However, there is an indication that very close collaboration in small PPGs also happens in Westminster, warranting a more in-depth exploration across devolved legislatures in comparison to the House of Commons (see Section 11.4).

This thesis also contributes to a body of literature which has been somewhat overshadowed by emerging discussions on modern campaigning and the mediatisation of politics – the debate on permanent campaigning (see Section 2.3). Arguably, this debate – compared to scholarly exchanges on modern campaigns or mediatisation – provides a different angle and is more pronounced and explicit in its embedment in the intersection point of research on political communication and parliamentary studies. One of the key pillars of the concept of permanent campaigning is the notion that governing and campaigning are increasingly entangled, if not merged (see, i.e., Elmer et al., 2012, Ornstein and Mann, 2000, Blumenthal, 1980, Caddell, 1976). Consequently, communication is not only a tool anymore for governments and legislators to pursue re-election; it has become a means and key consideration of any of their actions (i.e., legislating and policy-making). This study demonstrates that, at least on the level of parliamentary offices, this observation has not been identified. Political communication is – without a doubt – significant to parliamentary offices and

parliamentarians. However, the accounts of interviewees do not support the notion the different areas of activities of parliamentary offices that support legislators in their responsibilities are inseparably fused.

Considering the scandals in recent years regarding the treatment of PAs by some parliamentarians (see Section 9.3), this research can also provide an angle of immediate practical relevance. Interviewees, at large, describe the parliamentary workplace as a high-stress environment with a "sink-or-swim"-culture, often characterised by unprofessional management practices and unofficial expectations towards their performance, which might collide with the legal framework guiding their employment. Parliamentary institutions might benefit from considering this research when revising their frameworks. In particular, it has been suggested that MPs and MSPs are not necessarily aware of the managerial requirements of their role as legislators and would benefit from dedicated (mandatory) training. Political parties might also benefit from fostering an environment where parliamentarians and their staff regularly utilise available training (in some cases, there were conflicting accounts on whether training is available, indicating problems in properly communicating training opportunities). For example, it has been suggested by a majority of PAs that there would be very little time and resources to take advantage of available training – reinforcing the finding that "learning on the job" is prioritised. Overall, providing more training (i.e. on managerial practice, HR-related issues as well as employment rights of PAs), enforcing attendance and fostering an environment where all involved parties, staff members & parliamentarians appreciate training would help moderate some of the aspects that drive high staff turnover and possibly reduce occurrences of unprofessional behaviour.

11.2 Limitations

The findings of this research project have several limitations, which will now be discussed. The nature of a qualitative approach does not allow to claim generalisability, especially given that this study focuses on a particular case. While an interesting case, Scotland also has distinctive features, such as a dominant party in their party landscape, which might have impacted the results. For example, the lack of clear career prospects for parliamentary assistants within the parliament (beyond pursuing a political mandate) might have increased staff turnover (in favour of employers outside the parliament). While all big and medium-sized parties in the Scottish Parliament have MPs in the

House of Commons, which would allow, in theory, to change from being a PA of an MSP to a PA of an MP, very few suggested those as a career option. This could be due to several factors, such as having no opportunity when leaving the role, more attractive career opportunities outside the parliament, or not having established a good trust relationship with a future employer. However, it might also be due to the SNP being a nationalist, secessionist Scotland-based party where a change of employment from the Scottish Parliament to the House of Commons might not be regarded as promising or career progress. Suppose this is the case; this would affect a significant number of PAs and, with them, many of my interviewees.

The dynamic nature of politics and developments around social media causes another limitation. Interviewees note that social media is becoming more critical, but so far, it would not usually be the priority. However, with evolving social media platforms, this might change and could lead to further adjustments of focus towards social media with more emphasis on news values relevant to social media. Equally important are potential changes in the political landscape of Scotland. It is unclear whether a changing party landscape, e.g., by a decline of SNP's dominance, would impact political communication. Some interviewees highlighted that issues around Scottish independence and Brexit would have increased the tensions among parties, making the atmosphere in the Scottish Parliament more adversary. It remains to be seen whether a potential decline of the SNP could lead to a more consensual parliament, which might introduce changes reshaping some of the structural factors (e.g., increased oversight by the parliament over PAs, increased staff allowance, etc.). It might also lead to a situation where multi-party governments are more likely, which might impact the approach of parliamentary offices of the PPGs involved in the coalition. For example, an improved financial situation for those PPGs could mean they expand their central research and press units, offering PAs an inner-parliamentarian alternative to their workplace in an MSP's office.

The aforementioned high staff turnover might also set further limits to my findings. Most interviewees have already left their role as parliamentary assistants. The rapid generational change within the parliamentary workforce could be problematic since changes – e.g., within the work culture – might evolve. One potential area of change could be a greater awareness of the lack of professionalism in parliamentary offices, including problematic behaviour towards parliamentary assistants. While those changes

might be encouraging, they could also significantly impact the dynamics between parliamentary assistants and parliamentarians or even incentivise greater involvement of the parliaments in managing the parliamentary offices. Another change affected by the rapid turnover is social media handling. This study tried to account for those changes by including former parliamentary assistants and parliamentary assistants with longer tenures, as well as by conducting more interviews after the main fieldwork period in summer/autumn 2019. However, although these measures helped identify, contextualise and confirm observed trends, their ability to limit the risk of some of the findings becoming outdated in the near future is limited.

The sampling, as well as the sampling frame, also warrants caution towards the findings. For this research, different sampling strategies have been utilised. While it was primarily random sampling and initially interviewing a few pre-existing contacts, snowball sampling became quite important throughout the fieldwork. It increased the sampling size and provided valuable insights into the dynamics within MSPs' and MPs' offices. Still, it also risks that results have been more biased towards the experiences of subgroups within the sampling frame. While it has been tried to reduce the risk by actively integrating former PAs into the sampling and extending the fieldwork period, the risk of systematically missing out on experiences by PAs not reached by this sampling strategy persists.

Another significant limitation is the type of people who have been interviewed. It has already been noted that PAs are often recruited among graduates, and a substantial number of them have their first significant work experience as parliamentary assistants. This carries the risk of being relatively inexperienced in workplace-related issues and possible unawareness about dynamics and phenomena since they lack reference points to other workplaces. The lack of awareness might have even been amplified by the significant time constraints of the interviews, which took place in a high-stress environment. It cannot be excluded that this significantly impacted the answers. Additionally, some questions addressed sensitive topics (e.g., relationships with other staff members and parliamentarians). Although interviewees were encouraged not to answer questions if they felt discomfort, none of them refused to provide answers to the questions asked or withdrew from the interview. However, there is a significant risk that those answers have been affected by the sensitive nature of the questions. The introduction of former parliamentary assistants into the sampling frame was, among

other already outlined reasons, done to reduce those risks (lack of awareness and misleading answers to sensitive questions) since they are more experienced and removed from the parliament as a workplace. However, most of them still work in related areas close to the parliament (e.g., public relations, journalism, lobbying), which sustains the risk of biased answers due to the proximity of their new work to their old work environment.

It is also unclear to what extent the experiences and roles of Scottish PAs and their involvement in political communication are representative compared to other PAs outside the UK. This is primarily due to the lack of research on parliamentary assistants in general and their role in political communication on behalf of parliamentarians in particular. Consequently, the extent of the transferability of the findings will need to be explored, possibly by further research, to assess the broader impact of professionalisation and mediatisation on PAs, specifically their role in political communication and media management.

11.3 Future Avenues for Research in Political Communication

The limitations of the findings of this work mentioned above are best understood as challenges calling to be addressed by future research. While the study explores parliamentary assistants' role in political communication and media management of parliamentarians, it reveals further gaps calling to be addressed. One possible approach could be exploring to what extent similar findings could be generated in Wales, Northern Ireland or England on state and sub-state levels. Such research would allow us to investigate the impact of devolution on the role of parliamentary assistants. If this is embedded in a quantitative or mixed-method research design, it would also produce testable and generalisable results for the role of PAs and their involvement in parliamentarians' political communication and media management in the UK and its devolved territories. Given the neglect of the role of parliamentary researchers in the literature, a comparative approach beyond the boundaries of the United Kingdom would also be very valuable. It could help to understand whether the voting system in a PR system impacts the parliamentary assistants' roles in the political communication of parliamentarians and also clarifies whether the relationship between PA and parliamentarian is affected by different party systems and electoral systems.

A worthwhile area for further research would be the impact of being a parliamentary assistant with communication or research-related duties for the future career path of their incumbents. Such an investigation could focus on the individuals who chose to pursue a political career as a politician and those who remain in the wider professional political community of the parliaments (e.g., working in Public Affairs for political entities, seeking employment in think tanks or as a lobbyist). Interviewees identified the skills and experiences acquired by PAs as valuable and attractive to potential employers. It is unclear whether a PA's role is best understood as a traineeship for entering a political profession. If it can be classified as a type of vocational training, it would also be essential to explore its impact on the political environment. Evaluating the impact on the mediatisation and professionalisation of politics could be a potential focal point of future research. Studying parliamentary assistants from this angle would also invite comparative approaches across time and between parliaments.

Another area which invites further research is the relationship between parliamentary assistants and journalists from the perspective of journalists. Aspects such as networking strategies, their understanding and perception of PAs or how they understand and deal with the mediated character of the communication output directed at them (i.e. press releases) have yet to be studied. This could be done concerning the effectiveness and efficiency of particular communication and media management approaches and how this relationship affects the wider local community. The already mentioned study by Fisher (2014) provides another interesting angle on how this area could be approached by focusing on journalists who become parliamentary assistants or vice versa. While very few interviewed PAs have had a journalist background, there have been some cases where such a transition occurred. Potential investigation areas could include how this transition informs media management and communication approaches, whether it contributes to the already discussed "crisis in public communication" (Gaber, 2016), and whether there is a way back to journalism for former journalists.

PAs' precariousness and potential vulnerability should be more prominent in further scholarly debate. Interviewees addressed problematic relationships with their employers and the challenges of the parliament as a political workplace. They have also reflected on those issues concerning the young age and the lack of experience by parliamentary assistants. The topic could be approached from several angles, for example, whether

there are groups who are particularly affected and to what extent it affects the inclusiveness of the parliament as a workplace. The impact on political communication and media relations could also provide further insights, particularly into whether the precarious nature of the role drives part of the perceived high-stress and low-trust components of the parliamentary office as a workplace.

The impact of being a parliamentary assistant who communicates on behalf of an MP or MSP on political activism also provides a potentially insightful area for future research. The involvement of PAs in party political activities has already been documented in the findings. Still, it is unclear how this affects the perception of the parliamentarians or the PAs by party members. For example, it would be interesting to understand whether party members distinguish between the person who occupies the role of a PA and their role as a parliamentary assistant. Equally, it is unclear to what extent PAs might be involved in engaging with party members on behalf of the parliamentarian. Considering those activists are used as a resource for electoral campaigns, their involvement could significantly impact local campaigning activities.

Another aspect for future research would be how to disseminate knowledge about these actors to a wider public and which role PAs could play in increasing public engagement with the parliament as an institution and a workplace. Greater acknowledgement of their role would help to understand what parliamentarians do and how they interact with their environment, and it would help to increase the transparency of the parliament as an institution. Prior and Leston-Bandeira (2022) discussed parliamentary storytelling to increase parliamentary engagement with the public. PAs could be more prominently embedded by integrating them as a character or a story's narrator. Given that they are often the first point of contact when trying to get in touch with an MP or MSP, they are crucial mediators of the politician's position (by communication on the parliamentarian's behalf) and function as an interface between the public and parliamentarians. It would just be consequent to utilise their position to tell stories about the parliament with them or, through their eyes, to increase the public's understanding of the parliament as an institution and a place of work.

11.4 Future Avenues for Research in Parliamentary Studies

While this research was able to contribute to debates beyond political communication, i.e. parliamentary studies, it also demonstrates that a range of open questions remain –

providing opportunities for further studies on PAs within the parliamentary studies as a sub-discipline. One crucial area of investigation should address questions of political power and agency of PAs: Throughout the interviews, it has been indicated that playing a role in parliamentary life and shaping politics is one of the motivators for working as a PA. Given the importance of their role, a clear assessment of their agency and actual power in political processes through the parliamentarians they are working for would require furthering this research and exploring tactics in dealing and negotiating with MPs and MSPs. Some research has already been done on parliamentary officials, which could be used as a conceptual starting point (see, e.g., Yong et al., 2019, Egeberg et al., 2013, Winzen, 2011).

Interviewees also indicated that there is scope for influencing political decisions and agency (see, e.g., Interviewee V, M, TA, S and H), especially if the parliamentarian shows very little interest in the particular area or has only minimal knowledge of it – which is similar to the findings on officials in the European Parliament by Winzen (2011). Closely related to it, PA's acquired knowledge is valued by employers in and outside the parliament, i.e., for lobbying organisations and public affairs and the parliamentary administration. Some PAs use their experiences to advance in their political career and become parliamentarians themselves. Yet, it is unclear how much their former role as PA contributes to their career paths and their views and activities in their new roles as, e.g., lobbyists or legislators – or what this means for parliamentary institutions, their organisation, structure and performance. So far, there has been very little research done on career pathways by parliamentary staff, notably by Shepherd and You (2020). Their research demonstrates that staff members' career aspirations and prospects can have a substantial impact on legislative effectiveness, although their findings are limited to Congressional staff. However, the paper demonstrates that parliamentary studies should pursue further research to explore this avenue for future academic investigations.

Given the wealth of data on PAs provided in this thesis, comparisons to other parliamentary contexts would also provide an avenue for researchers. It has already been noted that the findings do not indicate substantial differences in the roles and practices of PAs in the Scottish Parliament compared to the House of Commons. While this is in line with debates on "new politics" (see Section 11.1) and could be partly due to political culture, it opens up the question of whether and to what extent the role of

PAs in other parliaments is different – in the UK context (compared to other devolved legislatures) and internationally (e.g., Germany, Spain or Finland). Approaching PAs' role comparatively could illuminate their relevance for parliaments in general and help to explore best practices in their employment. The latter seems particularly important, given the already mentioned scandals on abusive behaviour of parliamentarians towards their PAs, confirmed by some of the accounts of my interviewees and the recognised lack of professionalism in management practices more generally (see Interviewee C or Section 9.3). Considering the high-stress and fast-paced environment, which might even intensify points of conflict between PAs and parliamentarians, further investigation is also of practical relevance since it could help the recommendation (Section 11.1) to develop and facilitate means to professionalise the management conduct of parliamentarians to PAs.

Whichever avenue of investigation is taken by future research, the findings demonstrate that parliamentary assistants matter. There is still too little known about them, even though they significantly shape the output of what would be usually recognised as the parliamentarians' work results. While it would be problematic to diminish the role of the parliamentarian, who shapes and drives the dynamics in the parliamentary offices, the parliamentary assistant's role goes well beyond a supporting character. Parliamentary assistants are at the heart of the parliamentarian's activities. The findings of this research have demonstrated that they are vital for understanding political communication and the management of media relations (on behalf) of parliamentarians, as well as making sure that parliamentarians are able to fulfil their responsibilities as legislators.

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13 Appendix 1: Interview Topics and Schedule

Interviews will be semi-structured and focus on networking activities, interaction with the press, and workplace relationships that influence the ability of the press officers to fulfil their assigned tasks. Interviews with MPs/MSPs will be conducted similarly.

The interviews were primarily conducted during the summer recess of 2019.

Scheduling these interviews was guided by the availability of interviewees, which required scheduling interview appointments outside recess periods at any time convenient for the interviewees.

Some examples of questions and topics addressed in those interviews:

- workplace relationships influencing the work of the communication officer, such as
 - o How are communication strategies agreed upon?
 - o To what extent is the M(S)P involved in communication processes?
 - o How are other parliamentary assistants involved in communication processes (e.g., on social media platforms and with mass media)?
- networking activities, such as
 - o How are relationships with local journalists maintained?
 - o What impact does communication on social media have on relations to local media?
 - o How much does the relationship with local party associations influence your political communication activities?
 - o How does the relationship with national (Scotland / UK) party leadership influence your political communication activities?
- recruiting procedure and communication-related experiences before becoming a parliamentary assistant, such as
 - o (To parliamentarians:) Which features and qualifications were most important for giving the applicant the role of a communication officer?

- (To parliamentarians:) To what extent are you involved in working and revising messages on social media / local media?
- (To parliamentarians:) How did you prepare for your role as an employer, and to what extent did it influence your communication strategies?
- Crafting messages and working procedure:
 - How much freedom in prioritising and crafting messages do you have?
 - How important is the role of the political profile of your employer and the M(S)P as a person in framing your communication with media actors?

